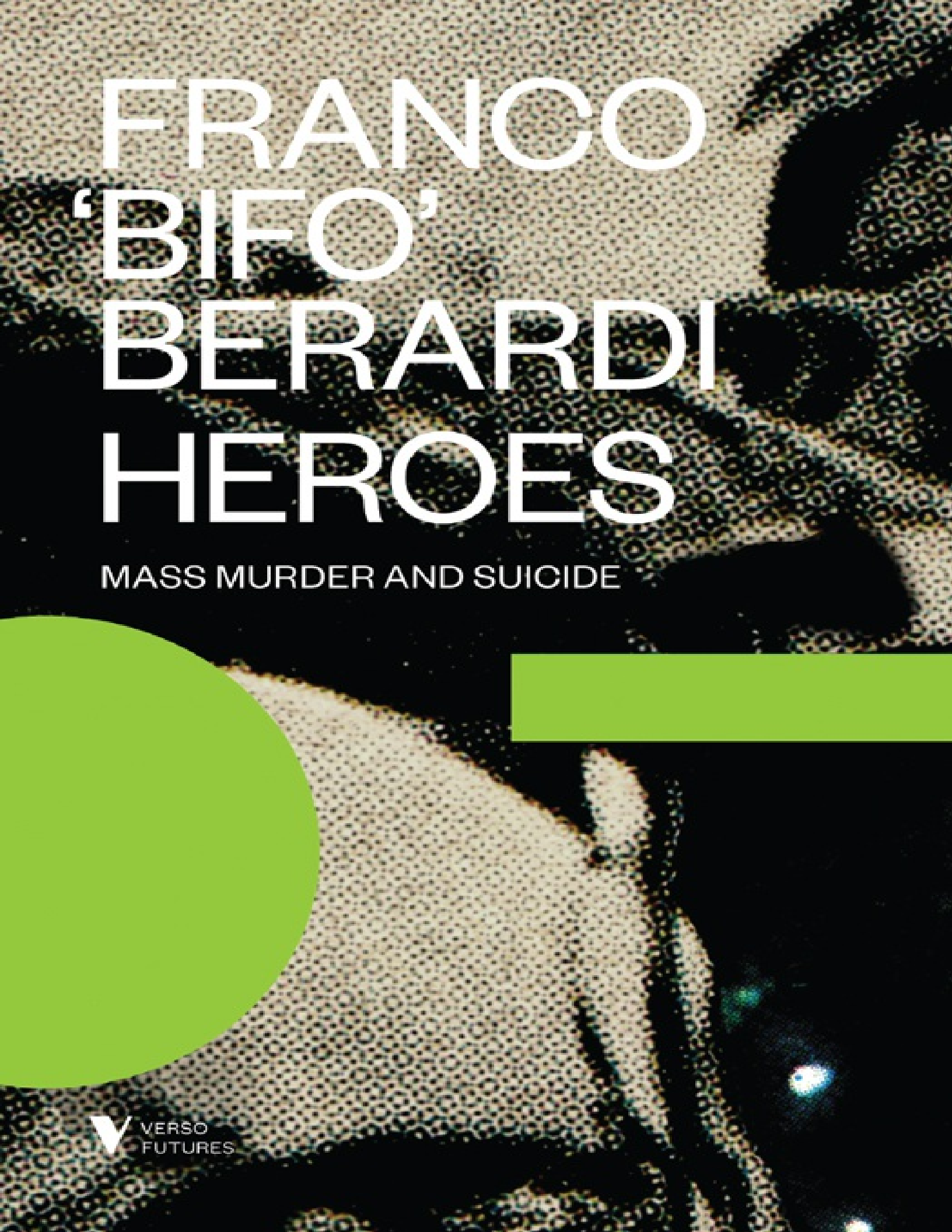

FRANCO 'BIFO' BERARDI

HEROES

MASS MURDER AND SUICIDE

VERSO FUTURES

Verso Futures

The law of the innermost form of the essay is heresy.
– Theodor Adorno

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Heroes

Mass Murder and Suicide

Franco 'Bifo' Berardi

VERSO
London • New York

First published by Verso 2015
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Verso
UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG
US: 20 Jay Street, Suite 1010, Brooklyn, NY 11201

www.versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN-13: 978-1-78168-578-5 (PB)
ISBN-13: 978-1-78168-577-8 (HC)
eISBN-13: 978-1-78168-579-2 (US)
eISBN-13: 978-1-78168-752-9 (UK)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

v3.1

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Acknowledgements

I want express my gratitude to some friends who, more or less consciously, have helped me to write this book.

Thanks to Marco Magagnoli, also known as Mago, for his telepathic inspiration. Thanks to Max Geraci for helping me to sense the colourful meaning of darkness. Thanks to Federico Campagna for his friendship and for his countless suggestions.

Four Notes in Guise of a Prologue

1

I decided to write this book in July 2012, after reading about the mass shooting in Aurora, Colorado, that had taken place at a movie theatre screening the latest Batman film. A mixture of repulsion and perverse fascination has always lured me to read voraciously about the perpetrators of this kind of mass murder, a kind that seems to be proliferating at the moment – particularly in the United States of America. But it was only when I read about James Holmes and the Aurora massacre that I decided to write about the subject. I was not spurred into action by the violence and absurdity of a country where any person, no matter whether mentally disturbed, can buy deadly weapons. We are all quite accustomed to that. What most impressed me was the metaphorical density of an act that could be interpreted as breaking the separation between spectacle and real life (or real death, which is the same). I doubt that James Holmes has ever read Guy Debord. Often, people act without reading the relevant texts. Yet Holmes's gesture carried a tang of situationism. The whole history of the twentieth-century vanguard was reconvened there, and monstrously restaged. 'Abolish art abolish daily life abolish the separation between art and daily life', the Dadaists said. Holmes, it struck me, wanted to eliminate the separation between the spectator and the movie; he wanted to be *in* the movie.

So I began to read compulsively about the massacre at the screening of the Batman movie. My interest led me to news stories about other males (white, black, old, young, rich, poor, but only males, no women at all – who knows why?) who shoot and kill people, and to further research into previous mass murders. From these studies, I came to the realization that the current becoming of the world could be better understood if observed through this kind of horrible madness, rather than through the polite madness of economists and politicians. I saw the agony of capitalism and the dismantling of social civilization from a very peculiar point of view: crime and suicide.

The naked reality of capitalism is today on display. And it's horrible.

2

The subject of this book is not merely crime and suicide, but more broadly the establishment of a kingdom of nihilism and the suicidal drive that is permeating contemporary culture, together with a phenomenology of panic, aggression and resultant violence. This is the point of view from which I'm looking at mass murder, focusing in particular on the spectacular implications of these acts of killing, and on their suicidal dimension.

I don't care about the conventional serial killer, the brand of secretive sadistic psychopaths who are attracted to other people's suffering and enjoy seeing people die. I'm interested in people who are suffering themselves, and who become criminals because this is their way both to express their psychopathic need for publicity and also to find a suicidal exit from their present hell. I write about young people like Seung-Hui Cho, Eric Harris, Dylan Klebold, and Pekka-Erik Auvinen, who killed themselves after trying to attract the attention of the world by ending the lives of innocent people. I also write of James Holmes, who committed a sort of symbolic suicide without actually killing himself.

I write about spectacular murderous suicides because these killers are the extreme manifestation of one of the main trends of our age. I see them as the heroes of an age of nihilism and spectacular stupidity: the age of financial capitalism.

3

In the book *The Wretched of the Screen*, Hito Steyerl recalls David Bowie's 1977 release of the single 'Heroes'.

> 'He sings of a new brand of hero, just in time for the neoliberal revolution and for the digital transformation of the world. The hero is dead – long live the hero! Yet Bowie's hero is no longer a subject, but an object: a thing, an image, a splendid fetish – a commodity soaked with desire, resurrected from beyond the squalor of its own demise. Just look at a 1977 video of the song and you'll understand why: the clip shows Bowie singing to himself from three simultaneous angles, with layering techniques tripling his image; not only has Bowie's hero been cloned, he has above all become an image that can be reproduced, multiplied, and copied, a riff that travels effortlessly through commercials for almost anything, a fetish that packages Bowie's glamorous and unfazed post-gender look as product. Bowie's hero is no

> longer a larger-than-life human being carrying out exemplary and sensational exploits, and he is not even an icon, but a shiny product endowed with post-human beauty: an image and nothing but an image. This hero's immortality no longer originates in the strength to survive all possible ordeals, but from its ability to be xeroxed, recycled, and reincarnated. Destruction will alter its form and appearance, yet its substance will be untouched. The immortality of the thing is its finitude, not its eternity. In 1977, the punk band The Stranglers delivers a crystal-clear analysis of the situation by stating the obvious: heroism is over. Trotsky, Lenin, and Shakespeare are dead. In 1977, as leftists flock to the funerals of RAF members Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, and Jan Carl Raspe, The Stranglers' album cover delivers its own giant wreath of red carnations and declares: NO MORE HEROES. Anymore.[1]

In the classical tradition, the hero belonged to the sphere of the epic imagination, separate from tragedy and lyrics. The hero was someone who subjugated Nature and dominated the events of history with the strength of will and of courage. He founded the city and warded off the demonic forces of chaos. This vision can still be found in the time of the Renaissance, and Machiavelli's prince can be considered the hero of modern political narration: the man who establishes the nation state, builds the infrastructures of industry and gives shape to a common identity.

This epic form of heroism disappeared towards the end of modernity, when the complexity and speed of human events overwhelmed the force of the will. When chaos prevailed, epic heroism was replaced by gigantic machines of simulation. The space of the epic discourse was occupied by semiocorporations, apparatuses for the emanation of widely shared illusions. These games of simulation often took the shape of identities, as with popular subcultures like rock, punk, cyberculture and so on. Here lies the origin of the late-modern form of tragedy: at the threshold where illusion is mistaken for reality, and identities are perceived as authentic forms of belonging. It is often accompanied by a desperate lack of irony, as humans respond to today's state of permanent deterritorialization by enacting their craving for belonging through a chain of acts of murder, suicide, fanaticism, aggression, war.

I believe that it is only through irony and through a conscious understanding of the simulation at the heart of the heroic game, that the simulated hero of subculture still has a chance to save itself.

In the year 1977 human history came to a turning point. Heroes died, or, better said, they disappeared. They were not killed by the foes of heroism, rather they transferred to another dimension: they dissolved, they turned into ghosts. So the human race, misled by mock heroes made of deceptive electromagnetic substance, lost faith in the reality of life and its pleasures, and started believing only in the infinite proliferation of images. 1977 was the year when heroes faded and transmigrated from the world of physical life and historical passion to the world of visual simulation and nervous stimulation. That year was a watershed: from the age of human evolution the world shifted to the age of de-evolution, or de-civilization.

What had been produced by labour and social solidarity in the centuries of modernity started to fall under finance's predatory process of de-realization. The conflictive alliance between industrious bourgeois and industrial workers – which had left the public education system, health care, transportation, and welfare as the material legacy of the modern age – was sacrificed to the religious dogma of the Market-God.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century the post-bourgeois dilapidation took the form of a financial black hole. This new system started to swallow and destroy the product of two hundred years of industriousness and of collective intelligence, and transformed the concrete reality of social civilization into abstraction: figures, algorithms, mathematical ferocity and accumulation of nothing in the form of money. The seductive force of simulation transformed physical forms into vanishing images, submitted visual art to spam spreading, and subjected language to the fake regime of advertising. At the end of this process, real life disappeared into the black hole of financial accumulation.

The question now is to see what's left of the human subjectivity and sensibility and of our ability to imagine, to create and to invent. Are humans still able to emerge from this black hole; to invest their energy in a new form of solidarity and mutual help? The sensibility of a generation of children who have learned more words from machines than from their parents appears to be unable to develop solidarity, empathy and autonomy. History has been replaced by the endless flowing recombination of fragmentary images. Random recombination of frantic precarious activity has taken the place of political awareness and strategy. I really don't know if there is hope beyond the black hole; if there lies a future beyond the immediate future.

Where there is danger, however, salvation also grows – said Hölderlin, the poet most loved by Heidegger, the philosopher who foresaw the future destruction of the future. Now, the task at hand is to map the wasteland where social imagination has been frozen and submitted to the recombinant corporate imaginary. Only from this cartography can we move forward to discover a new

form of activity which, by replacing Art, politics and therapy with a process of re-activation of sensibility, might help humankind to recognize itself again.

1 Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen*, p. XX.

Chapter 1

The Joker

Very Real

Twentieth of July 2012. The young man buys a ticket, enters the theatre and sits in the front row. About thirty minutes into the film, he leaves the building through an emergency exit door that he props open. He goes to his car, changes into protective clothing and retrieves his guns. At 12.30 a.m., he re-enters the theatre through the opened door. He is wearing a gas mask, a ballistic helmet, bullet-resistant leggings, a throat protector and tactical gloves.

Some people in the audience see the masked gunman, but they take him for one of the many enthusiastic batman fans who have dressed up for the screening. A man who is at the theatre with his family will later say that at first the attack looked like a publicity stunt for the film's premiere. Then, he will add, the show became 'very real, very quickly'.

> About 20 minutes into the movie, there was sort of a solemn moment in the movie and a gas canister sort of type thing – I thought it was a firework at the time – kind of flew across the screen and landed kind of in front of me and to the side. People there started to get out of their seats and started moving. And then, from the bottom right from where I am sitting, from the bottom right corner of the theatre, there started being the muzzle flash of the gun. At the time, I thought it was still fireworks. And then I was hit here (pointing at lower shoulder and chest) and I realized it was something much more serious. And people started screaming. There was a lot of chaos.

At 12.38 a.m. the gunman throws a smoke bomb. As the gas begins to fill the theatre, he fires a shotgun, first at the ceiling, then at the audience. He also fires a Smith & Wesson M&P15 semi-automatic rifle with a 100-round drum magazine, and a Glock 22 handgun. Some of the bullets pass through the wall and hit people in the adjacent theatre, where the same film is screening.

> He must have shot 19 or 20 rounds. People were scrambling left and right. Somebody behind us, maybe a straggler, was hurt. He said 'I am hit'. The guy looked like the Terminator. He didn't say anything. He was just shooting and shooting and shooting. There were people crawling down the stairs trying to escape the hail of gunfire. It was a very bad scene. Very bad.

The alarm system goes off soon after the attack begins and the staff helps people to evacuate. Some people report the shooting via tweets or text messages rather than calling the police. Twelve people are killed, and seventy others are injured. At 12.45 a.m. the shooter is arrested next to his car. He does not offer any resistance.

He has reddish-orange hair, he seems dazed and scarcely aware of his surroundings, and a few hours later investigators will disclose his name as James Holmes. Apparently, the shooter acted alone and was not part of a larger group or terrorist organization, and one of his classmates will later reveal that Holmes said several times that he wanted to kill people.

According to a jail worker interviewed by the *Daily News*, Holmes wants to know how the movie ends. The shooter keeps saying to his Colorado jailers that he doesn't understand why he is locked behind bars. Some jailers who are in contact with him believe he's faking amnesia.

Art and Life

Within days, a rubber mask depicting John Holmes's face, expressionless and with orange hair as it appears in his first mugshot, is available for purchase on eBay for $500.

> Halloween is only a month away. SHOCK EVERYONE YOU KNOW! He was referred to as 'The Joker', 'The Dark Knight Shooter', 'The Ilama', 'The Extraordinarily Gifted' but his real name is JAMES HOLMES! There is nothing scarier than crawling into James Holmes' mind and wearing his face. His 'soul penetrating eyes' and 'The Joker' orange hair makes this mask the most disturbing object you will ever own. Imagine owning the mask of supposedly the most dangerous mass murderer in US history. This is a high quality latex rubber mask which was custom designed for a private collector overseas. I won this mask playing high stakes poker tournament when I was in Europe. I guaranty you that this is the only mask in the world and it is practically priceless because it was used in the production of the most controversy documentary which will come out in 2013. This mask is

sold as it is and there are no returns. If you have 0 feedback and you are interested to bid on this item you have to contact me first. I will ship the mask immediately after I receive the payment. Good luck!

Soon after publication of the announcement, however, eBay removed the mask offered by user 'realface13'. eBay told *ABC News*: 'The listing was removed because it did not comply with our Offensive Materials policy. Out of respect for victims of violent crimes, eBay does not allow listings that attempt to profit from human tragedy or suffering.'

Catwoman's Heart Is Broken

I read the news: I can't stop. I spend part of the night surfing one website after another.

> Holmes – who shot dead 12 people including 8-years-old Veronica Moser-Sullivan – entered jail to shouts of 'kid killer'. Prisoner Wayne Medley, 24 – who was at the Arapahoe Detention Centre, Colorado, when Holmes was brought in – said: 'All the inmates were talking about killing him. Everyone was looking for an opportunity. It's all they could talk about.'
>
> James Holmes told the cops that he was Batman's enemy, the Joker. His answering machine message was also inspired by the Joker. Once in jail, he kept spitting at the guards. One prison insider said of the gunman, who was under suicide watch in solitary confinement: 'He hasn't shown any remorse. He thinks he's acting in a movie.'

In the wake of the shooting, Catwoman actress Anne Hathaway commented: 'My heart aches and breaks for the lives taken and altered by this unfathomably senseless act. I am at a loss for words how to express my sorrow. My thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families.'

Christopher Nolan, the director of *The Dark Knight Rises*, issued a statement:

> Speaking on behalf of the cast and crew of *The Dark Knight Rises*, I would like to express our profound sorrow at the senseless tragedy that has befallen the entire Aurora community. I would not presume to know anything about the victims of the shooting but that they were there last night to watch a movie. I believe movies are one of the great American art forms and the shared experience of watching a story unfold on screen is an important and joyful pastime. The movie theatre is my home, and the idea

> that someone would violate that innocent and hopeful place in such an unbearably savage way is devastating to me. Nothing any of us can say could ever adequately express our feelings for the innocent victims of this appalling crime, but our thoughts are with them and their families.

Subsequently, DC Comics delayed the release of *Batman Incorporated #3*, which includes a scene in which a female Leviathan agent brandishes a handgun in a classroom full of children while disguised as a schoolteacher. Warner Bros also recalled the trailer of the film *Gangster Squad*, because of a scene in which a character shoots at a movie theatre audience with machine guns.

The Joker and God

Who is James Holmes? Who is the young man who broke into the Aurora movie theatre and jumped beyond the wall which separates art and life?

The twenty-four-year-old Joker has been described variously as 'troubled' or 'unstable' or 'detached from reality'. Someone said that the young killer was operating under satanic influence. But Senior Pastor Jerald Borgie of Penasquitos Lutheran Church in San Diego recalled him as a shy, intelligent boy who was driven to succeed in his studies. The pastor said that the Holmes family has belonged to the San Diego church for about ten years and that the shooter's mother attended services regularly and volunteered her time.

According to Benge Nsenduluka, writing in the *Christian Post*, James was a 'nice Christian boy,' schooled in the divine truth from an inspired, inerrant Bible, like millions of young American Christians. James was a 'normal Christian boy', who used to be heavily involved in his local Presbyterian church.

In an article entitled 'What Presbyterians Believe', Reverend G. Aiken Taylor writes:

> Presbyterians believe that everything which happens takes place according to the will of God and can be fully understood only in the will of God. Nothing can come to any man that He does not allow for his own purposes and glory. He overrules the actions of evil men and brings their evil to naught. He works all things after the counsel of His own will and turns all things – even apparent evil – to ultimate good in the lives of those who love Him, who are called according to His purpose.[1]

Just after the rampage, the Christian apologist Rick Warren blamed the state school's 'liberal way' of teaching the theory of evolution and preventing prayer

in schools. In a tweet to his followers and believers, he wrote: 'When students are taught they are no different from animals, they act like it.' Bryan Fischer, director of Issue Analysis for Government and Public Policy at the *American Family Association*, suggested that the shooting was directly connected to liberals who 'spent sixty years telling God to get lost'. Speaking on the radio programme 'Focal Point', broadcast on American Family Radio's nationwide network of 125 stations, Fischer explained:

> The reason that America exists is because God established this nation in order to show what a nation that follows the Scriptures and the God of the Scriptures can be … to provide a model to the rest of the world of what a culture looks like when it is steeped in the spirit of the Lord and spread the Gospel around the world. Nowadays you can't have prayer in public schools. We kicked the Bible out of public schools in 1963 … Then we got rid of the Ten Commandments in 1980. Don't forget the Commandment: Thou shalt not murder. What if [James Holmes] had been exposed to that every day in the educational system? What if the Ten Commandments were reinforced: 'Thou shalt not murder'?… Who knows if things could have been different? But we've tried it the other way. We've tried the liberals' way for 60 years now. What did we get? We have massacres in Aurora.

Mike Huckabee, 44th governor of Arkansas and a candidate in the 2008 United States Republican presidential primaries, blamed the Colorado massacre on sin and – what else? – on a mythical, encroaching secularization: 'Ultimately, we don't have a crime problem or a gun problem – or even a violence problem. What we have is a sin problem.'

Ostracized

Weeks before James Holmes enacted his horrific scheme, he attempted to forge an emotional connection on an online dating website. It appears that he was already planning his imminent arrest at that time, as his profile includes the line: 'Will you visit me in prison?' He also wrote in his introductory paragraph: 'Looking for a fling or casual sex gal. Am a nice guy. Well, as nice enough of a guy who does these sort of shenanigans.'

Holmes attempted to contact three different women, after opening his profile on 5 July, but they all turned him down. One of them stated that Holmes was not actually interested in sex, and that he was 'just looking to maybe chat … nothing sexual'.

Neuropsychologist Dominic Carone suggested that Holmes had a difficult time interacting with others emotionally. In addition, he hypothesized that Holmes may have identified with the Joker character as a result of a history of being bullied and ostracized.

Ready to strike, on Thursday evening Holmes drove the five miles from his home to the multi-screen Century 16 cinema in a sprawling shopping mall downtown. There he bought a ticket for the midnight screening of *The Dark Knight Rises*, the new Batman film, entered the auditorium with other excited cinema-goers, only to leave for the car park through the emergency exit. He launched his real-life rampage as the moment that he re-entered the cinema with an armoury of ammunition.

Weapons

Dan Oates, the chief of police in Aurora, reported:

> Holmes purchased four guns at local gun shops and through the internet he purchased over 6,000 rounds of ammunition, more than 3,000 rounds of 0.223 ammunition for the assault rifle, 3,000 rounds of 0.40 caliber ammunition for the two Glocks in his possession, and 300 rounds for the 12 gauge shotgun. Also through the internet he purchased multiple magazines for the 0.223 caliber assault rifle including one 100-round drum magazine which was recovered from the scene. Even if it was semi-automatic I'm told by experts that with that drum magazine he could have got off 50 to 60 rounds within a minute. As far as we know it was a pretty rapid pace of fire in the theatre.

Holmes's apartment was also booby-trapped with an array of sophisticated material.

A few days after the Aurora mass murder, Gregory D. Lee posted the article: 'Who's Crazier, James Holmes or Gun Control Advocates?' on the blog *theintellhub*:

> Would anti-gun advocates feel better if instead of using an 'assault weapon' Holmes used explosives to blow up the entirely sold out 16 theaters and leveled the building? How about if he swung two machetes at his helpless victims? The bottom line is that it really doesn't matter what weapons are used when the perpetrator is hell-bent on killing as many people as physically possible. Somehow, evil people like Holmes will find a way.

According to John Lott, author of the book *More Guns Less Crime*, laws which allow citizens to carry concealed weapons steadily reduce violent crime, because criminals are deterred by the risk of attacking an armed victim. A large part of the American population seems to believe that carrying guns in public spaces allows them to better protect their life and – more importantly – their property.

Yet the two countries with the highest number of instances of mass murder are the United States and Finland. The United States is number one in the world in gun ownership, with eighty-eight weapons for every hundred citizens, children included. Finland ranks eighth, with thirty-two guns for every hundred citizens. In between, we find countries like Serbia, Iraq and Yemen, where mass murders are commonplace, for ethnic, religious or political reasons.

The website of Gun Owners of America (the only no-compromise gun lobby in Washington) proclaims:

> Guns save more lives than they take; prevent more injuries than they inflict. Law-abiding citizens use guns to defend themselves against criminals as many as 2.5 million times every year – or about 6,850 times a day. This means that each year, firearms are used more than 80 times more often to protect the lives of honest citizens than to take lives. Of the 2.5 million times citizens use their guns to defend themselves every year, the overwhelming majority merely brandish their gun or fire a warning shot to scare off their attackers. Less than 8% of the time, a citizen will kill or wound his/her attacker. As many as 200,000 women use a gun every year to defend themselves against sexual abuse. Armed citizens kill more crooks than do the police. Citizens shoot and kill at least twice as many criminals as police do every year (1,527 to 606).[2]

We should not forget that American identity has been forged by the extermination of native people who inhabited the territory before the arrival of the Puritans from Europe.

What is meant by the term ‘Puritan’? Pure is understood to mean that only that which corresponds to the word of God deserves to live. The colonization of South America by the ‘impure’ Catholics of Spain was ferocious, as colonization always is. But the impure Catholics came to terms with the mythologies and ways of life of the native Indians, and something survived of the pre-Columbian civilizations of Central and South America. Today, a resurgence of the Indian culture is underway, and leaders like Evo Morales, a descendant of indigenous people, can emerge.

But the Puritan killers, intolerant of any perceived ‘impurity’, erased any trace

or seed of the native culture and population, in the most comprehensive genocide of human history. This is the cradle of the United States of America.

A Pretty Shameful Day

On 28 September 2012, 7.23 a.m., a man shot and killed a masked intruder apparently trying to break into his sister's home in New Fairfield, Connecticut, only to discover the suspected burglar was his own fifteen-year-old son, Tyler Giuliano. Police say the sister, who was home alone, called her brother, Tyler's father, who lived next door. The man rushed from his home with a loaded gun and opened fire on the masked individual, who confronted him with what appeared to be a weapon in his hand, according to police.

It was not clear why the teenager was lurking outside his aunt's home at around 1 a.m. dressed in black and wearing a ski mask. Town Selectman John Hodge said Giuliano told the police that the masked person had lunged at him. Only after the ski mask was removed did the elder Giuliano, a local schoolteacher, realize he had shot his own son.

Both Jeffrey Giuliano and his son, a tenth grader at New Fairfield High School, seemed happy and were popular. A neighbour, Lydia Gibbs, said she heard nine shots fired and thought it was fireworks.

'The whole thing is just something out of a Hollywood script', Hodge said.

On 14 December 2012, a twenty-year-old man, Adam Lanza, committed one of the most appalling crimes in American history: after shooting and killing his own mother, he drove to the Sandy Hook Elementary School and killed six adult staff members and twenty children. When the police arrived the young killer shot himself in the head. This was the second deadliest mass shooting by a single person in American history, after the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre, and the second deadliest mass murder at an American elementary school, after the 1927 Bath School bombings in Michigan.

The shooting prompted renewed debate about gun control in the United States, and a proposal for new legislation banning the sale and manufacture of certain types of semi-automatic firearms and magazines with more than ten rounds of ammunition. But the debate and the widespread indignation resulted in nothing, when the amendment that would have expanded background checks for gun purchases was defeated in the Senate by a Republican filibuster. Despite hopes that the national outrage following the school shooting would force Washington to act, the limited compromise amendment received fifty-four votes in favour, winning the majority but falling short of the sixty votes needed to override a

Republican filibuster.

After the vote, a furious Barack Obama delivered a stinging rebuke to the senators (almost all Republicans) who blocked the proposals, and to the National Rifle Association, which had funded those Congressmen.

'This is a pretty shameful day for Washington', he said. As on many other occasions during his two-term presidency, Obama exemplified the impotence of politics, a sort of living negation of his winning motto, 'Yes we can'.

Batman and Rove

In his cell, the self-appointed Joker James Holmes wants to know: does the movie have a happy ending? Of course it does. A happy ending is guaranteed when it comes to the imaginary Empire made in Hollywood.

I went to see the movie as soon as I could. *The Dark Knight Rises* is a mediocre movie with Nazi undertones. Bane, the film's villain, is a humourless giant who terrorizes Gotham's population in order to stage a sort of fascist *golpe* with the help of an army of guerrillas resembling jihadist fighters and anti-globalization protestors. The message is twisted and basically racist.

I remember the 1989 Batman film, directed by Tim Burton. The DC Comics superhero was portrayed as a psychopath obsessed by his paranoid ego, fighting another psychopath – the Joker – played by Jack Nicholson, who in turn is plagued by his schizophrenic ego.

Talking about his 1989 movie, Tim Burton explained, 'The whole film and mythology of the character is a complete duel of freaks. It's a fight between two disturbed people.' He added,

> The Joker is such a great character because there's a complete freedom to him. Any character who operates on the outside of society and is deemed a freak and an outcast then has the freedom to do what they want … They are the darker sides of freedom. Insanity is in some scary way the most freedom you can have, because you're not bound by the laws of society.[3]

The wit and sharpness of Tim Burton is entirely missing in Nolan's obtuse movie. Indeed, as Andrew Klavan wrote in reference to the *The Dark Knight*, Nolan's trilogy 'is a paean of praise to the fortitude and moral courage that has been shown by George W. Bush in this time of terror and war'.[4] But the similarities between the latest Batman trilogy and the ideology of the Bush administration exceed the limits of the cinema screen. James Holmes's inability to distinguish between reality and movies mirrors the attitude of Karl Rove, the master of the

American political imagination during the years of Bush's Holy War. When journalist Ron Suskind defended the prerogative of others in his profession to pursue the judicious study of discernible reality, the wizard of Republican campaign strategy responded,

> That's not the way the world really works anymore. We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors … and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.[5]

Is this a symptom of psychosis? Yes, it is. But it is not peculiar to Karl Rove.

The sublimation of reality to simulacrum is the quintessential feature of semiocapitalism, the contemporary regime of production in which capital valorization is based on the constant emanation of information flows. In the psychosphere, reality is replaced by simulation.

> Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyper-real. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra – it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. The desert of the real itself.[6]

Mobilization

Masks, phantoms, simulations. The referential value of signs is obliterated.

Jean Baudrillard conceived a general semiology of simulation based on the premise of the end of referentiality both in the economy and in language.

The process of de-materialization of value is part of the general process of abstraction that is the general trend of capitalism. Marx's theory of value is based on the concept of abstract labour: labour time is the source and the measure of value. This implies that, from the point of view of valorization, the concrete usefulness of the working activity is irrelevant. What counts is the abstract work–time, not the concrete contents of productive activity.

In the sphere of the market, things are not considered according to their usefulness, but only in terms of their exchangeability. Similarly, in the sphere of language, words are exchanged and valued according to their performativity, that is, their pragmatic efficiency. It is not truth, but effectiveness, against which we measure value in the sphere of communication. Pragmatics, as opposed to hermeneutics, is the methodology of social communication, particularly in the age of pervasive media: when information flows are pervading every space of the public discourse and imagination, simulation takes the central place in the emanation of the shared hallucination we call the 'world'.

Signs are exchanged with signs, not with real things.

I n *Death and Symbolic Exchange*, Baudrillard speaks of the 'emancipation of signs'. The emancipation of signs from the referential function can be regarded as a general trend of late modernity, and one that is prevailing not only in the fields of literature and art, but also in politics and economics.

From this perspective, it can be seen that money has become not so much an indicator of value, but rather a factor of mobilization.

The word 'mobilization' originally refers to military assembly and the activation of the social body of the nation when the homeland is engaged in war against the enemy. Since the nineteenth century, thanks to the introduction of conscription and to modern systems of transportation, war became a general mobilization of the population. Late capitalism is transferring the military logic of mobilization into the sphere of the economy: work, production and exchange are all transformed into a battlefield whose only rule is competition.

Our entire precarious life is submitted to this one imperative: competition. All of our collective energies are enlisted to one goal: to fight against all others in order to survive.

Mobilization gives way to frenzy, and ultimately can lead to panic – after which, depression follows.

Similar effects of submission, impoverishment and exploitation are produced by the imposition of an all-pervasive system of debt over the body of society. Debt functions as a weapon against the autonomy of society, transforming money into blackmail. Young people are obliged to borrow money from the bank in order to pay for their studies, since the public system of education has been destroyed by Neoliberal fanaticism, and private schools are prohibitively expensive. Upon leaving university, they are obliged to accept any kind of precarious job in order to repay their debts, suffering all measure of blackmail in the process. Money, which is supposed to be the measure of value, has been corrupted such that it now acts as a tool for complete submission. Debt has become a sort of metaphysical curse. Within this metaphysical debt, money, language and guilt are all entwined. Debt is guilt, and as guilt, it is entering the

domain of the unconscious, where money translates all objects into each other.

Half Sigma

Just a few days after the Aurora mass murder I read some comments on the blog *Half Sigma*:

> There are a ton of people like Holmes. When I was in college I played WoW [World of Warcraft], and I knew a lot of people in my guilds real life story. Many of them were like Holmes, and used WoW as an escape.
>
> There are a ton of Holmes out there but most just become herbivores. They get some shitty job, live in a shitty apartment, eat shitty food. But with an internet connection, the world is theirs. Medicate on videogames, porn, and cheap carbs. No status in real life? Get some in game status. Joke in real life? Become a guild leader and boss people around. There was a show called 'The Guild' which went through what these people's lives are like, and is probably way to sympathetic because its meant for entertainment.
>
> As perverse as it sounds, Holmes' decision to take action (misguided, pointless, tragic) at least took more balls then most of the herbs I knew just waiting to die in WoW.

'Conquistador' writes in a comment: 'I know a guy that wants to end himself but the only reason he goes on is because he's looking forward to the next major movie, comic book, and video game release. I kid you not.'

1 G. Aiken Taylor, 'What Presbyterians Believe', pp. 5–7.

2 'Fact Sheet: Guns Save More Lives,' 29 September 2008, gunowners.org/sk0802htm.htm.

3 Tim Burton, *Burton on Burton*, p. 80.

4 Andrew Klavan, 'What Bush and Batman Have in Common', *Wall Street Journal*, July 25, 2008.

5 In the article in which this quote originally appeared, Rove was not identified as the source. See Ron Suskind, 'Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush', *New York Times Magazine*, 17 October 2004. The identity of the previously unnamed Bush aide was disclosed in print by Mark Danner, 'Words in a Time of War: On Rhetoric, Truth and Power', in *What Orwell Didn't Know: Propaganda and the New Face of American Politics*, András Szántó (New York, 2007), p. 17.

6 Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, pp. 166.

Chapter 2

Humanity Is Overrated

Art and Death

Invited to express his opinion on the shocking events of the previous day, Karlheinz Stockhausen declared at a press conference on 12 September 2011:

> Well, what happened there is, of course – now all of you must adjust your brains – the biggest work of art there has ever been. The fact that spirits achieve with one act something which we in music could never dream of, that people practise ten years madly, fanatically for a concert. And then die … And that is the greatest work of art that exists for the whole cosmos. Just imagine what happened there. There are people who are so concentrated on this single performance, and then five thousand people are driven to Resurrection. In one moment. I couldn't do that. Compared to that, we are nothing, as composers … It is a crime, you know of course, because the people did not agree to it. They did not come to the 'concert'. That is obvious. And nobody had told them: 'You could be killed in the process.'

Anyone who is familiar with the history of art of the twentieth century should not be surprised by Stockhausen's provocative statement.

In a subsequent message, Stockhausen stated that the press had published 'false, defamatory reports' about his comments, and clarified as follows:

> At the press conference in Hamburg, I was asked if Michael, Eve and Lucifer were historical figures of the past and I answered that they exist now, for example Lucifer in New York. In my work, I have defined Lucifer as the cosmic spirit of rebellion, of anarchy. He uses his high degree of intelligence to destroy creation. He does not know love. After further questions about the events in America, I said that such a plan appeared to be Lucifer's greatest work of art. Of course I used the designation 'work of art' to mean

the work of destruction personified in Lucifer. In the context of my other comments this was unequivocal.

It is hard to deny that the criminal and suicidal action of Mohamed Atta and his accomplices bears some of the features of a work of art: it is a spectacular action with strong symbolic intentions and precise rules of composition and execution. Saying this does not imply any positive appreciation on that act of mass murder, of course, but it may assist our understanding of the metamorphosis of crime in the spectacular media age.

Mass murder is nothing new, but the particular brand of mass murder that simultaneously involves a spectacular acting out and a suicidal intention seems to me peculiar to the present transition towards nothingness. In fact this kind of action, comprising spectacular performance, mass murder and suicidal intention (although not always fulfilled, as in the case of James Holmes), has become more frequent during the last fifteen years or so.

It is possible to detect in the actions of many contemporary mass murderers a spectacular intention that has something to do with Warhol's promise: 'in the future, everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes.' That is, it has to do with the need to be televised as the only proof of one's existence.

Some suicidal mass murderers demonstrate, more than others, a particular consciousness of the spectacular and communicative aspect of its enactment. Such is the case of Pekka-Erik Auvinen.

Pekka-Erik Auvinen

On 7 November 2007, eighteen-year-old Pekka-Erik Auvinen killed nine students at Jokela School in the Finnish city of Tuusula, sixty kilometres north of Helsinki.

The shooting came just a few hours after a video announcing the massacre had been posted on the YouTube channel of the user 'Sturmgeist89'. In the video, a photo of Jokela High School shattered into fragments, to reveal the red-tinted picture of a man pointing a gun at the camera.

At 11.40 a.m. Pekka-Erik Auvinen entered the school's main hallway and immediately opened fire on all those who were in his way. The school director, Helena Kalmi, ordered all students and teachers to barricade themselves inside their classrooms. She then left the school administration office and tried to convince Auvinen to surrender.

Auvinen shot Kalmi seven times in the schoolyard, killing her. A few minutes later, as the school nurse tended to some of the students who lay wounded, Auvinen killed her too. Then the young killer began walking around the school

proclaiming a revolution, and urging the students to destroy school property.

One of Auvinen's teachers recounted: 'He was moving systematically through the school hallways, knocking on the doors and shooting through the doors. It felt unreal. A pupil I had taught myself was running towards me, screaming, a gun in his hand'.

He also poured gasoline around the building in an attempt to set the school on fire, but he was too nervous to do so successfully, acting as if he were a desperate automaton.

A police patrol arrived at 11.55 a.m., followed later by around one hundred police officers. When the police tried to negotiate with Auvinen, he answered by firing at them, though none of the shots hit any of the officers.

At 12.24 p.m. Auvinen shot himself in the head. He was found in a boys' lavatory still alive but unconscious at 1.54 p.m.

According to Finnish media, there have been four stabbings at schools since 1999, although none of these was fatal. A major attack in the country happened in 2002, when a young man detonated a bomb in a shopping mall in Helsinki, killing himself and six others.

In September 2008 at Kauhajoki school, a young man named Matti Juhani Saari mimicked Pekka-Erik Auvinen's massacre by shooting and fatally injuring ten people with a semi-automatic pistol before shooting himself in the head.

With a population of only five million people, incidents of mass shooting in Finland are more frequent than in many other countries with significantly larger numbers of people. Unsurprisingly, Finland also has one of the highest per capita ratios of handgun ownership in the world.

Natural Selector's Manifesto

What is particularly striking in Pekka-Erik Auvinen's case is the precise and public explanation of the philosophy behind his murderous action. 'I am a cynical existentialist, antihuman Humanist, antisocial social Darwinist, realistic idealist and godlike atheist,' writes Auvinen on his website, just before performing his crime. He also left behind a 'Natural Selector's Manifesto', which has been widely shared on the internet.

> *How Did Natural Selection Turn Into Idiocratic Selection?*
> Today the process of natural selection is totally misguided. It has reversed. Human race has been devolving very long time for now. Retarded and stupid, weak-minded people are reproducing more and faster than the intelligent, strong-minded people. Laws protect the retarded majority which

> selects the leaders of society. Modern human race has not only betrayed its ancestors, but the future generations too. […] Naturality has been discriminated through religions, ideologies, laws and other mass delusion systems.
>
> Humans are just a species among other animals and world does not exist only for humans. Death and killing is not a tragedy, it happens in nature all the time between all species.[1]

Its focal point is the perfectly Neoliberal emphasis on a misconceived notion that is mistakenly called natural selection, which has to be restored against the socialist protection of the weak against the strong.

> Not all human lives are important or worth saving. Only superior (intelligent, self-aware, strong-minded) individuals should survive while inferior (stupid, retarded, weak-minded masses) should perish. There is also another solution to the problem: stupid people as slaves and intelligent people as free. What I mean is that they who have free minds, are capable of intelligent existential and philosophical thinking and know what justice is, should be free and rulers … and the robotic masses, they can be slaves since they do not mind it now either and because their minds are on so retarded level.

Contrary to what is generally believed, Nazism is not the preferred ideology of this kind of mass murderer. Some aspects of Nazism are clearly evident in their declarations: violence, de-humanization of the victim, racism. But Auvinen identified Nazism as one of the authoritarian forms of de-individualization. His only credo is the cult of the strong individual, the lonely winner: the financial agent and the gunman.

Auvinen also wrote in his manifesto:

> Collective de-individualization is a phenomenon where individual will be trained as part of the mindless herd controlled by state, corporation, church or some other organization, group, ideology, religion or mass delusion system and adopt it's rules, morality and codes of conduct. This phenomenon has been familiar in all despotic, authoritarian, totalitarian, monarchist, communist, socialist, nazi, fascist and religious societies throughout history.

Then, at the end of the text Auvinen declares his readiness to die:

> I am ready to die for a cause I know is right, just and true … even if I would

lose or the battle would be only remembered as evil … I will rather fight and die than live a long and unhappy life.

This is my war: one man war against humanity, governments and weak-minded masses of the world! No mercy for the scum of the earth! HUMANITY IS OVERRATED! It's time to put NATURAL SELECTION & SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST back on tracks!

Pekka-Erik Auvinen's manifesto can be considered a sort of rhetorical declaration of the philosophy of mass murder – murder as a metaphorical message of pure social Darwinism. This is the key to any attempt to interpret his actions; that is, the rhetorics of his enunciation.

When it comes to the content, to the political intentions of his enunciation, his philosophy is crystal clear:

What do I hate/What I don't like?
Equality, tolerance, human rights, political correctness, hypocrisy, ignorance, enslaving religions and ideologies, antidepressants, TV soap operas & drama shows, rap music, mass media, censorship, political populists, religious fanatics, moral majority, totalitarianism, consumerism, democracy, pacifism, state mafia, alcoholics, TV commercials, human race.

Like every good Thatcherite of the last thirty years, the first thing that he expresses his hatred for is equality. Then, being less hypocritical than the average Neoliberal politician, he gives full vent to his hatred for tolerance, human rights and political correctness. Evidently, he has no time for censorship and totalitarianism, democracy and pacifism. In essence, the manifesto bears all the hallmarks of the programme of a Tea Party activist. Before enacting the atrocity at the Jokela School, Pekka-Erik Auvinen took 'selfies', pictures showing him wearing a T-shirt that summed up his intentions and presented what could be called his 'poetics'. Three words were written on the T-shirt: 'Humanity is overrated.' I don't know where Pekka-Erik found these words, whence came his inspiration, but these three words deserve to be seriously considered. They are not banal.

Humanism and Nature

In his 1985 novel *White Noise*, Don DeLillo writes:

I believe, Jack, there are two kinds of people in the world. Killers and diers.

> Most of us are diers. We don't have the disposition, the rage or whatever it takes to be a killer. We let death happen. We lie down and die. But think what it's like to be a killer. Think of how exciting it is, in theory, to kill a person in direct confrontation. If he dies, you cannot. To kill him is to gain life-credit. The more people you kill the more credit you store up. It explains any number of massacres, wars, executions.[2]

The sentence 'Humanity is overrated' implies the impassive point of view of Nature, of an emotionless flowing of time. This is the point of view of the God of the Old Testament, the God who created man without feeling his suffering. The innovation produced by the New Testament is essentially a change of perspective: God becomes a man, and comes to Earth to feel and suffer the same passions and pains that human beings are accustomed to feel. The passionless time of God is interrupted, broken and interwoven with the time of man. This is why the Humanist revolution occurs in the sphere of Christianity: both Christianity and Humanism conceive of history not as part of the temporal sphere of the eternal truth, of impassive Nature, but located within the sphere of human relativism. The point of view of man's suffering becomes more important than that of impassive truth.

The foundations of modern civilization are to be found right here: in the individuation of the sphere of human history and of human sociality, distinct from and not compliant with the eternal rules of the universe. Exactly because, thanks to the scientific revolution, we know the mechanical laws that govern the planets, the sky and the stones, we can disentangle a different law for human existence, based on love and compassion (*cum-patiri*, literally 'suffering together').

In the Humanist sphere of modernity, the natural space, governed by the unchangeable laws of physics, is separated from the historical space, which is governed by the will of the Prince, or by democratic will. Modern civilization is founded on the idea that the social world is primarily obliged to comply not with the laws of the universe, but with the laws of compassion: mutual understanding, solidarity. The establishment of political law is only possible with an understanding of human interests and passions.

In *Oratio de dignitate homini*, Pico della Mirandola is explicit on this point: God has created man as distinct from the rest of the universe. Whereas the universe is built according to precise rules; man has no inherent rules to bind him.

> We have given to thee, Adam, no fixed seat, no form of thy very own, no gift peculiarly thine, that thou mayest feel as thine own, have as thine own, possess as thine own the seat, the form, the gifts which thou thyself shalt

> desire. A limited nature in other creatures is confined within the laws written down by Us. In conformity with thy free judgment, in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bounds; and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself. I have placed thee at the center of the world, that from there thou mayest more conveniently look around and see whatsoever is in the world. Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have We made thee. Thou, like a judge appointed for being honorable, art the molder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer. Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul's reason into the higher natures which are divine.[3]

Modern history takes place in this space of indetermination, and therefore of freedom, where human laws are considered a human construction, not the reflection of natural rules imposed by God. Pico's vision reflects the Humanist approach to the problem of freedom, and here we find the thread that links Humanism to the Enlightenment. In the Humanist space of indetermination, human reason creates its own rules, and the universality of moral and political laws is based on human reason, not on natural law.

Social Civilization, Social Darwinism

Socialism can be considered a logical development of this line of thought, and as the final manifestation of the modern construction of a Humanist civilization. The Humanism of the Renaissance age affirmed the autonomy of human space from the impassive laws of Nature; subsequently, the Enlightenment acted as rational regulator of this autonomous human space. The socialist political legacy of the nineteenth century has been the affirmation of a possibility of justice and equality, which is not based on Nature, but on both human reason and compassion, the ability to share the same feelings, the same suffering and the same goals.

As a result of these progressive developments, modernity culminated in the creation of a form of social civilization, a civilization in which common needs prevailed over the affirmation of individual interests. This social civilization was forged with the intention of preventing interminable wars of every man against the other. Yet, over the last thirty years, the social civilization has been crumbling, under the blows of a philosophy of social Darwinism, which has acted as the ideological precursor to the affirmation of Neoliberal politics on a global scale.

This form of philosophy has a strong materialistic foundation that is difficult to contest. Social Darwinists say that benevolent principles cannot stop the affirmative strength of evolution, in the social as in the natural sphere.

If natural evolution is characterized as the survival of the fittest, historical evolution is no exception. Therefore it is useless to oppose the natural prevalence of the fittest. The weak can be saved only by the compassionate action of the strongest individuals, who have the right to develop the economy according to their possibilities and their interests. This implicitly means that there is no distinction between social life and Nature.

Tellingly, the philosopher and economist Friedrich Hayek asserted that Adam Smith's invisible hand regulates the market almost as a natural force. According to the idea that the fittest survive, and the unfit are doomed to fail, contemporary Neoliberal ideology erases the Humanist distinction between the sphere of natural law and the sphere of moral reason. Human relations – namely economic relations – follow natural laws of self-regulation, so there is no need for any special regulatory intervention, either by the nation state or by any other political organization. No special privilege can be assigned to humankind, as the crude energies of the market are the only effective regulators of economic life, and therefore of social life as a whole.

Pekka-Erik Auvinen's motto 'Humanity is overrated' is a mere rewording (a paraphrase) of the Neoliberal affirmation of the superior efficiency of the invisible hand that regulates the economic sphere. The natural law of the survival of the fittest is seen as the invisible hand that guides the economy, and the economy is the most crucial and decisive sphere of human action and culture. Economic rationality tramples any other form of human rationality, and through its enforcement the emotionless law of Nature celebrates its triumph. Humans must bend to its will.

This is the lesson that Pekka-Erik Auvinen wishes to teach us, and he does not stand alone at this particular lectern.

YouTube Killer

Pekka-Erik Auvinen accurately prepared the mediatization of his show. Not only did he write a manifesto, he took pictures of himself wearing a T-shirt with his campaign headline: '*Humanity is overrated*'. He also took care to broadcast his video messages through YouTube. Since nobody would have noticed all this, had he not killed nine people, in addition to himself, the murders and subsequent suicide can be considered, in a sense, as a form of self-advertising.

I n *Shooting for Fame*, published by the online magazine *Flow*, Michael Serazio writes:

> In the Web 2.0 biosphere, we are all broadcasters and we are all witnesses … A century of mass media accumulation has made fame the dominant currency of postmodern social capital. Yet social media introduces deep volatility into fame as currency in a way prefigured by Leo Braudy: 'As each new medium of fame appears, the human image it conveys is intensified and the number of individuals celebrated expands.' Before television, this was the vague, distant seduction of film fame; after television, it suddenly *appeared* open to all; and with the dawn of the Internet era (that Auvinen exploited so fiendishly), those studio walls have been fully knocked down commencing a hyper-mobility of images and avatars. Yet the technologies that empower the Web 2.0 'prod-user' are the same advances that cheapen the classical definition of fame and its existential appeal: singularity, ubiquity, permanence.'

Crime is an amplifier and a consolidator of fame. Only if you do something really gruesome will your narcissism find a lasting confirmation. Message (natural selection), media (YouTube videos) and crime are thereby linked in an indissoluble way.

In his intriguing text, Michael Serazio compares Auvinen's media style with the style of other killers. Interestingly, the Columbine shooters seem to have been using as reference points the work of popular film directors.

> Auvinen was not the first in this regard. Klebold and Harris had homemade videotapes that showed them fantasizing about their posthumous portrait: 'Directors will be fighting over this story,' Klebold said – and the boys chewed over which director could be trusted with the script: Steven Spielberg or Quentin Tarantino.

In reality, Steven Spielberg and Quentin Tarantino have been replaced by Michael Moore and Gus Van Sant, but the boys were not entirely mistaken. Serazio also compares Auvinen's style of communication with the style of Seung-Hui Cho, who visited mass slaughter on the campus of Virginia Tech.

> In the midst of his own grisly rampage in April 2007, Seung-Hui Cho sent NBC News a 1,800-word manifesto, 43 photographs, and 25 minutes of videotape. In earlier media eras, the celebrity-seeking youth shooter had professional gatekeepers in the way; that Cho, in 2007, pre-mediated by sending NBC a P.R. kit seemed technologically anachronistic. Today's youth

> terrorist can, through an (anti)-social media web, be 'producer, director, star' and, now, distributor as well … If Cho's egomania – fertilized by the current climate of technology and celebrity – meant mailing a packaged narrative to NBC, Auvinen knew that he could land on countless screens without needing a broadcast network intermediary. His online presence was prolific; he wrote in English rather than Finnish to maximize his audience; and his home computer contained mash-ups (many of which made their way online) omnivorous in texture: pastiches of Auvinen himself, Hitman video game footage, a Discovery Channel docudrama on Columbine and, taking the viewer fully through the Baudrillardian looking-glass, a remix of *Natural Born Killers*. But immortality is born of inspiring copycats and, appallingly, Auvinen's YouTube horror was not the last visited upon Finland. Less than a year later, a 22-year-old vocational student announced, via video, on a social networking site, 'You will die next.' Days later, he killed ten.

Both the Columbine killers and Pekka-Erik Auvinen wanted to air some message, to become famous, and used video and the internet to give vent to their rage and to broadcast their vision of the world.

The Joker James Holmes is different: he both subverted and further developed the relationship between crime and the media. While Harris and Klebold were hoping for Spielberg's attention, Holmes was already mimicking a character from Nolan's movie. Holmes is already part of the world of Batman, reconfiguring Marvel's creation in reality, dissolving the boundary of the screen and forcing the audience to participate in the story that they have chosen merely to watch.

For the spectacular mass murderer, the aim is to break the mirror of the spectacle. For him, the border between reality and imagination are blurred, indistinct, distorted. He wants to take part in the spectacle, so that the spectacle may become life, and – ultimately – death.

1 Extracts from 'The Natural Selector's Manifesto' are quoted from 'School Shooting in Finland', 7 November 2007, http://science-logs.com/pharyngula/2007/11/07/school-shooting-in-finland/.

2 Don DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 290.

3 Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man and Other Works*, p. 5.

Chapter 3

Winning for a Moment

Columbine

Twentieth of April in the last year of the twentieth century. In the space of an hour, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, senior students at Columbine High School, massacre one teacher and twelve fellow students, while injuring twenty-seven others. The pair then commit suicide.

The Columbine High School massacre marked a turning point in the eyes of many, in that it implied the conscious creation of a mise-en-scène, given the meticulous preparation and the elaboration of intellectual motivations in the diaries written before by the two boys before the massacre. It also had an enormous impact on the American imagination, inspiring two film directors to produce movies depicting the events at Columbine.

Just two years after the massacre, Michael Moore released his *Bowling for Columbine*, which was intended to describe the social background, if not the causes, of the criminal act. The film focused on the systematic use of violence by the American foreign strategists and military, the easy accessibility of weapons in the open market and on the internet, the obsession of American society with fear and military aggressiveness, and the violence which has generally pervaded North American daily life.

Although Moore's account was persuasive, it showed only a part of the story. While it focused on the social context, it lacked any insight into the subjectivity of the perpetrators – the psychopathology of human beings exposed to electronic hyper-stimulation during their formative years, the special fragility of the first generation to grow up in the virtual age.

The following year, in 2003, Gus Van Sant released his film *Elephant*. Here, the director chose to delve deep into the psychological, to deal with the substance of the deranged subjectivities at work, and to try to grasp the intimate suffering of the two young men who conceived and performed the crime. Van Sant describe not only their aggressiveness and their violence, but also their confused search

for tenderness, their frustration and loneliness, as it played out until their final act of self-destruction.

Obviously, we cannot reduce such a complex event to a mere combination of social, psychological or ideological lines of causation. In any such sequence of acts there lies something that goes far beyond any logical explanation. Yet, it is possible to see this form of psychopathology not as an isolated phenomenon, but as a symptom of a widespread form of suffering. This is what makes Gus Van Sant's movie so interesting.

In his journal, Eric Harris wrote of his admiration for natural selection, and of his wish to place everyone in a version of the computer game *Doom* so that he could see to it that the weak die and only the strong would live.[1]

Not surprisingly, the addiction of both young men to video games attracted the attention of journalists, critics and psychologists. It is widely assumed that protracted exposure to highly violent video games may produce an effect of desensitization in the minds of young people like Eric and Dylan, but this superficial observation, in focusing on the content of video games, fails to take into account the cognitive and psychological mutation produced by prolonged immersion in a digital environment. It is not the content of the game, but the stimulation itself, that produces the effect of desensitization to the bodily experience of suffering and of pleasure.

Clearly, not everybody becomes a mass murderer merely because they play video games or engage in digital stimulation. But the mass murderer is only an exceptional manifestation of a general trend in this general mutation of the human mind.

Technology–Language Precariousness

In her 1975 book *The Show and Tell Machine*, Rose Goldsen describes a future generation of humans transformed by the mediascape – then mainly characterized by TV and advertising – and foresees a telling mutation in the field of psychology and language: 'We are breeding a generation of human beings whose primal impressions come from a machine – it's the first time in history this has occurred.'[2]

Television and, more recently, the digital revolution have ushered in formidable transformations to the human mental environment. The fact that human beings learn more vocabulary from a machine than from their mothers is undeniably leading to the development of a new kind of sensibility. The new forms of mass psychopathology of our time cannot be investigated without due

consideration of the effects of this new environment, in particular the new process of language learning.

Two main developments demand consideration: the first is the dissociation of language learning from the bodily affective experience; the second is the virtualization of the experience of the other.

This first aspect of the transformation is particularly interesting. According to Luisa Muraro, an Italian writer whose work is mainly dedicated to elaborating a feminist philosophical perspective, access to language is fundamentally linked to the affective relation between the body of the learner and the body of the mother. The deep, emotional grasp on the double articulation of language, on the relation between signifier and signified in the linguistic sign, is something that is rooted in the trusted reliance on the affective body of the mother. When this process is reduced to an effect of the exchange between machine and human brain, the process of language learning is detached from the emotional effect of the bodily contact, and the relation between signifier and signified becomes merely operational. Words are not affectively grasping meaning, meaning is not rooted in the depth of the body, and communication is not perceived as affective relation between bodies, but as a working exchange of operating instructions. We can expect that psychic suffering will soon follow.

Beyond this, a second transformation has happened in the psychological sphere: young people spend their early formative years in a constant relationship with infomachines, while experiencing less and less face-to-face bodily contact with others. Children are increasingly removed from the bodily presence of other children and subjected to a virtual form of communication with distant entities whose body does not belong to a sensitive and sensible space.

Sensibility itself is at stake, here. Sensibility is the faculty that allows human beings to understand those signs that are not verbalized, and that cannot be reduced to words. Sensibility (and sensitivity, which is the physical, erotic face of the non-verbal ability to understand and to exchange meaning) is the interpersonal film that makes possible the empathic perception of the other. Empathy (the ability to feel the pleasure and the sorrow of the other as part of our pleasure and sorrow) is not a natural emotion, but rather a psychological condition that is cultivated and refined, and which, in the absence of such cultivation, can wither and disappear.

There is much evidence to suggest that this mutation in the experience of communication is producing a pathology in the sphere of empathy (an autistic trend) and in the sphere of sensibility (desensitization to the presence of the other). And this mutation of the psychic and linguistic interaction may also be at the root of the contemporary precariousness of life. Precariousness is not only the condition of labour in the age of global deterritorialization, but it is also the

fragmentation of the social body, the fracturing of self-perception and of the perception of time. Time no longer belongs to the individual, and the capitalist no longer buys the personal life of individuals; instead, people are erased from the space of work, and time is turned into a vortex of depersonalized, fragmentary substance that can be acquired by the capitalist and recombined by the network-machine. Cognitive labour in particular – the work of information and imagination – is particularly susceptible to the precariousness rule. Being immaterial and purely informational, this kind of work does not need to be localized in a physical space. It can be transferred, fragmented, fractured and finally recombined in the abstract space of the internet.

Winning for a Moment

On the day of the massacre, Eric Harris wore a white T-shirt on which the words 'Natural selection' were printed in black. References to natural selection also occur in Harris's diaries, as they will do, years later, in the writing of Pekka-Erik Auvinen.

Like the large majority of the generation that has grown up in the Neoliberal decades, the young Eric Harris is totally persuaded that the strong have the right to win and to predate. It is the natural philosophy that he has absorbed in the social environment in which he was educated, and it is also the underlying rationale of the video games that he loved to play. But the young man knew very well that he was not going to be a winner in the social game. Instead, he decides that he will be a winner for a moment: I'll kill and I'll win; then I'll die. The murderous action is conceived as revenge for the humiliation that he has suffered in the daily game of competition. The bullying that he endured at school is described in painful detail in his journal:

> Everyone is always making fun of me because of how I look, and how fucking weak I am and shit. Well, I will get you all back: ultimate fucking revenge here. You people could have shown more respect, treated me better, asked for my knowledge or guidance more, treated me more like a senior, and maybe I wouldn't have been as ready to tear your fucking heads off … That's where a lot of my hate grows from. The fact that I have practically no self-esteem. Especially concerning girls and looks and such. Therefore people make fun of me … constantly … therefore I get no respect and therefore I get fucking PISSED.

and 'Whatever I do people make fun of me, and sometimes directly to my face.

I'll get revenge soon enough. Fuckers shouldn't have ripped on me so much, huh! HA!'[3]

His friend Dylan Klebold also knows that he is destined to be a loser, and likewise wants to be a winner, for an hour, before a violent death. He wrote: 'You've been giving us shit for years. You're fucking gonna pay for all the shit! We don't give a shit. Because we're gonna die doing it.'

Harris and Klebold's psychology could be synthetically described as a suicidal form of the Neoliberal will to win. In the wake of the Neoliberal proclamation of the end of class struggle, the only social categories remaining are winner and loser. No more capitalists and workers; no more exploiters and exploited. Either you are strong and smart, or you deserve your misery. The establishment of capitalist absolutism is based on the mass adhesion (mostly unconscious) to the philosophy of natural selection. The mass murderer is someone who believes in the right of the fittest and the strongest to win in the social game, but he also knows or senses that he is not the fittest nor the strongest. So he opts for the only possible act of retaliation and self-assertion: to kill and be killed.

Kryptonite

> This Metropolis built of Kryptonite in which no Superman dared set foot, where wealth was mistaken for riches and the joy of possession for happiness, where people lived so polished lives that the great rough truths of raw existence had been rubbed and buffed away, and in which human souls had wandered so separately for so long that they barely remembered how to touch; this city whose fabled electricity powered the electric fences that were being erected between men and men, and men and women too?[4]

Eric Harris wanted to join the United States Marine Corps, but his application was rejected shortly before the shootings because he was taking the drug Fluvoxamine, an SSRI anti-depressant, which he was required to take as part of court-ordered anger management therapy. The autopsy reports showed that he had Fluvoxamine in his body at the time of death. Fluvoxamine works by inhibiting the uptake of serotonin, a neurotransmitter, from the spaces between nerve cells following its release. As a result, a greater amount of serotonin is available in these spaces to attach to other nerves, which in turn stimulates them. Neurotransmitters are released by nerves, travel across the spaces between nerves and then attach to receptors on other nerves. Many experts believe that an imbalance in neurotransmitters is the cause of depression and other psychiatric disorders.

But neurochemistry is not sufficient to explain depression and mental suffering at large. We need a broader picture that encompasses both cultural context and social background.

Modern culture and political imagination have emphasized the virtues of youth, of passion and energy, aggressiveness and growth. Capitalism is based on the exploitation of physical energy, and semiocapitalism is grounded in the subjugation of the nervous energy of society. The notion of exhaustion has always been anathema to the discourse of modernity, of romantic *Sturm und Drang*, of the Faustian drive to immortality, the endless thirst for economic growth and profit, the denial of organic limits. Growth is not simply an economic phenomenon, but a cultural concept, linked to the vision of the future as infinite expansion.

In the 1972 book *The Limits to Growth*, the Club of Rome asserted the need to re-structure social production in accordance with the finite nature of Earth's natural resources. Capitalism responded to this warning by instigating a cognitive transformation in production and by creating a new semiocapitalist sphere, thus opening up new possibilities for seemingly endless expansion.

Economic phenomena have long been described in psychopathological terms (euphoria, depression, slump, up and downs …), but when the production process involves the brain as the primary unit of production, psychopathology ceases to be a mere metaphor and becomes instead a crucial element of economic cycles. Throughout the 1990s the overall economy expanded literally euphorically. Prozac culture became an integral part of the social landscape of the internet economy, which was expected to unfold in the manner of infinite growth. Hundreds of thousands of Western operators, directors and managers took innumerable decisions in a state of chemical euphoria and psychopharmacological light-headedness.

But although the productivity of the networked brain is potentially infinite, the limits to the intensification of brain activity remain inscribed in the affective body of the cognitive worker: these are the limits of attention, of psychic energy, of sensibility. While networks have produced a leap in the speed and in the very format of the info-sphere, there has not been a corresponding leap in the speed and format of mental reception. The receivers, human brains of real people made of flesh, fragile physical organs, are not formatted according to the same standard as the system of digital transmitters. The available attention span for the info-workers is constantly being reduced, involved as they are in a growing number of mental tasks that occupy every fragment of their attention span. They take Viagra because they don't have time for sexual preliminaries. They take cocaine to be continuously alert and reactive. They take Prozac to block out the awareness of the meaninglessness of their working activity and life.

The first symptoms of this imbalance were already visible in the first months of the new century: a psychopathic phenomenon of over-excitation and panic. Inevitably, as with a patient affected by bipolar disorder, the financial euphoria of the 1990s gave way to a spectacular depression. After the years of irrational exuberance (as Alan Greenspan described them) the social organism was unable to sustain any longer the chemical euphoria that had fuelled its enthusiastic competitiveness and economic fanaticism. The hyper-saturation of the collective attention culminated in a social and economic depressive collapse.

Just Do It

In the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* the syndrome of 'running amok' is described as a form of sociopathic behaviour consisting in uncontrollable rage and related states of deep depression.

'Running amok' is an expression that comes from the Malay language. In the original Malaysian context, a man who has previously shown no signs of violent anger acquires a weapon and, in a sudden frenzy, kills or injures anyone in the vicinity. Running amok is a way of re-establishing one's reputation as a man to be feared and respected, but is also a way of escaping the world when life has become intolerable, and generally culminates in suicide. It's a culture-bound syndrome, whose manifestations are shaped by the cultural context and expectations.

We may describe this syndrome as a form of disconnection between the rational elaboration and the act. The person suffering from depression feels guilty because s/he is unable to compete and to win, in an environment saturated with incitements to act, to mobilize energies. A violent break from the thread of depressive paralysis can sometimes seem to be the only way out – an action separated from reflection, an action that does not imply any future, a visible sign of existence, of mobilization, of energy. A violent acting out, as disconnected from a conscious elaboration: *just do it*. Nike's motto is a good introduction to the cycle of depression, catatonia and psychotic acting out that can culminate into spectacular murderous suicide.

Just do it: violence, explosion, suicide. Killing and being killed are linked in this kind of acting out, although the murderer may, exceptionally, survive. When running amok, the borders between one's body and the surrounding universe are blurred, and so is the limit between killing and being killed. Panic, in fact, is the simultaneous perception of the totality of possible stimulations, the simultaneous experience of everything, of every past, every future. In this state of mental

alteration the distinction between the self and the universe collapses.

In Freud's time the environment was essentially repressive, and acting out took the form of repetitive and compulsory acts. The compulsory act was part of a neurotic framework of denial and repression. Today, the psychotic framework of hyper-stimulation and constant mobilization of nervous energy is pushing people, especially suggestible young people, socially marginalized and precarious, to a different kind of acting out: an explosive demonstration of energy, a violent mobilization of the body, which culminates in the aggressive, murderous explosion of the self.

Arctic Sea Ice

Contrary to negative feedback, which maintains stability in a dynamic system through a reduction of the exciting factors, positive feedback is a process in which the effects of a disturbance on a system result in an increase in the intensity of the factors which generate the disturbance. In other words: *A produces more of B which in turn produces more of A*. Thermal runaway, for instance, is a situation in which an increase in temperature provokes a further increase in temperature, often leading to a destructive result.

An example of positive feedback is the overheating of the atmosphere caused by the greenhouse effect – a process which is already reaching a point of irreversibility.

According to meteorology experts, summer 2012 was the hottest summer ever – or rather, the hottest so far. On 28 August 2012 scientists reported that sea ice in the Arctic plummeted to the lowest level on record, a confirmation of the drastic warming in the region, and a likely harbinger of larger changes to come. Professor Jennifer Francis, a scientist who studies the effect of sea ice on weather patterns, of Rutgers University, told the *New York Times*: 'It's hard even for people like me to believe, to see that climate change is actually doing what our worse fears dictated. It's starting to give me the chills, to tell you the truth'.[5]

Scientific forecasts based on computer modelling have long suggested that it could take until mid-century before the Arctic would be free of summer sea ice. But the prodigious melting of 2012 lends credibility to more pessimistic analyses that suggest it could happen before the decade is out.

'The ice is thin,' said Professor Francis.

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1 A transcript of Harris's journal is available at schoolshooters.info/eric-harris-journal.pdf.

2 Rose K. Goldsen, *The Show and Tell Machine*, p. 5.

3 Extracts from the journal of Eric Harris have been taken from the transcript available at schoolshooters.info/eric-harris-journal.pdf.

4 Salman Rushdie, *Fury*, p. 86.

5 Justin Gillis, 'Satellites Show Sea Ice in Arctic Is at a Record Low', *New York Times*, 27 August 2012.

Chapter 4

Cho's Psychosphere

Sixteenth of April 2007. The campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia, United States. In his backpack, student Seung-Hui Cho carries chains, locks, a hammer, a knife, two legally purchased semi-automatic pistols and almost 400 rounds of hollow point ammunition.

At 7.15 a.m., Seung-Hui Cho kills two pupils in the West Ambler Johnston Hall. He then walks back to his dorm room, deletes his email and removes the hard drive from his computer. He goes to a post office and mails a package of writings and video recordings to NBC News. At 9.45 a.m. he returns to Virginia Tech, enters the Norris Hall, kills thirty people and finally shoots himself.

Thirty-two people are dead; twenty-three others are wounded. It is the deadliest shooting incident by a single gunman in US history, and one of the deadliest in the world.

The action performed by Cho was extremely complex and protracted. According to investigators, after entering Norris Hall, Cho chained the three main entrance doors shut. He placed a note on the chained doors, claiming that any attempts to open the door would cause a bomb to explode. Shortly before the shooting began, a faculty member found the note and took it to the building's third floor to notify the school's administration. At the same time, Cho was starting to shoot students on the second floor.

The police received the first call a few minutes after the first shots.

After opening and closing several doors, as if he was looking for a specific class, Cho killed a professor who was lecturing in a room, then continued shooting, killing nine of the thirteen students who were in the class. Then the young man entered another room and killed six students and a professor. He was prevented from entering two other rooms by barricades erected by the students who were inside.

An Israeli survivor of the Holocaust, Professor Liviu Librescu, forcibly prevented the killer from entering Room 204. Librescu was able to hold the door closed until most of his students escaped through the windows, but he died after being shot multiple times through the door. Two more people were killed in

Room 211 while attempting to barricade the door.

The Suffering of Cho

Cho arrived in the United States at the age of eight with his parents and his sister Sun. The psychiatric report on the mental health history of Seung-Hui Cho, published on the website of the Virginia government as part of the *Mass Shootings at Virginia Tech: Report of the Review Panel*, expands on the difficulty Cho experienced in integrating in this new country:

> The transition was difficult: none of the family spoke English. Both children felt isolated. The parents began a long period of hard labor and extended work hours at dry cleaning businesses. English was not required to do their work, so both there and at home they spoke Korean. Sun stated that her brother seemed more withdrawn and isolated in the United States than he had been in Korea. She recalled that at times they were 'made fun of', but she took it in stride because she thought 'this was just a given'. In about two years, the children began to understand, read, and write English at school. Korean was spoken at home, but Cho did not write or read Korean.
>
> The biggest issue between Cho and his family was his poor communication, which was frustrating and worrisome to them. Over the years, Cho spoke very little to his parents and avoided eye contact.
>
> According to one record the panel reviewed, Mrs. Cho would get so frustrated she would shake him sometimes. He would talk to his sister a little, but avoided discussing his feelings and reactions to things or sharing everyday thoughts on life, school, and events. If called upon to speak when a visitor came to the home, he would develop sweaty palms, become pale, freeze, and sometimes cry. Frequently, he would only nod yes or no.[1]

Displacement, cultural and linguistic disorientation, loneliness and a sense of inadequacy in a new cultural landscape. The psychiatric labelling and further marginalization from the group, the bullying, the humiliation, the silent rage, the desire for revenge. Cho's story is the story of millions of migrants all around the world.

The same morning that Cho committed the massacre, he sent a package of information to the NBC News Channel: video recordings, photographs, diaries, texts. The stranger, the secluded, the marginalized, the unstable person is surprisingly normal when it comes to dealing with television. The postmodern confidante is the media, and he chose NBC News.

The president of NBC News decided to show only two of the twenty-five minutes of video, seven of the forty-three photographs, and thirty-seven sentences of the twenty-three pages of written material that were last modified after the first shooting. He stated that the content that was not shown included 'over the top profanity' and 'incredibly violent images', and he expressed his hope that the unreleased material would never be made public.

This is the voice of Seung-Hui Cho, from one the texts that have been released:

> Vandalizing my heart wasn't enough for you. Raping my soul wasn't enough for you. Committing emotional sodomy on me wasn't enough for you. Every single second wasted on your wanton hedonism and menacing sadism could have been used to prevent today. Ask yourselves, What was I doing all this time? All these months, hours, seconds. Only if you could have been the victim of your crimes. Only if you could have been the victim …
>
> To you sadistic snobs, I may be nothing but a piece of dog shit. You have vandalized my heart, raped my soul, and torched my conscious again and again. You thought it was one pathetic, void life that you were extinguishing. Thanks to you, I die, like Jesus Christ, to inspire generations of the Weak and Defenseless people – my Brothers, Sisters, and Children – that you fuck.
>
> Like Moses, I spread the sea and lead my people – the Weak, the Defenseless, and the Innocent Children of all ages that you fucked and will always try to fuck – to eternal freedom. Thanks to you Sinners, you Spillers of Blood, I set the example of the century for my Children to follow.
>
> You may stand steadfast on the battlefield of your life's dedication to eternal terrorism American Al-Qaeda, but the Children that you have fucked will rise. By the power greater than God we will hunt you down, you Lovers of Terrorism, and we will kill you.[2]

The police officers who reviewed the video, pictures and manifesto concluded that the contents of the media package had marginal value in helping them to learn and understand why Cho committed the killings. Dr Michael Welner, who also reviewed the materials, stated that 'these videos do not help us understand Cho. They distort him. He was meek. He was quiet. This is a PR tape of him trying to turn himself into a Quentin Tarantino character.'

These appraisals by the police and Dr Welner miss the point that the 'Quentin Tarantino character' and the quiet, meek, depressed apathetic Cho were, in fact, two sides of the same coin.

Cho's words sound melodramatic, but there is also something authentic in them. Clearly, this is not a justification for his crime, but it is an explanation of

frustrations that are not infrequently felt. Indeed, the president of NBC News might have decided to censor Cho's messages because they sounded too much like a frightening manifesto for the frail people of the precarious generation, a call to explosive suicide launched to all the lonely young nerds of the world. How many of them are there? Roaming in the blogosphere I read texts of young students who declare to be admirers of Cho because they feel the same hatred for the bullying that they have endured for years. Cho's madness speaks volumes about the psychopathology of the precarious generation. The effects of the physical, linguistic and cultural deterritorialization are visible in his mental and social experience.

> Mrs. Cho (the sister) made a big effort to help Cho become better adjusted, and she would talk to him, urging him to open up, to 'have more courage.' The parents urged him to get involved in activities and sports. They worried that he was isolating himself and was lonely. Other family members asked why he would not talk. He reportedly resented this pressure. Mr. Cho, having a quiet nature himself, was slightly more accepting of his son's introspective and withdrawn personality, but he was stern on matters of respect. Cho and his father would argue about this. According to one of the records reviewed, Cho's father would not praise his son. Where Cho's later writings included a father-son relationship, the character of the father was always negative. Cho never talked about school and never shared much. His mother and sister would ask how he was doing in school, trying to explore the possibility of 'bullying.' His sister knew that when he walked down school hallways a few students sometimes would yell taunts at him. He did not talk about feelings or school at all. He would respond 'okay' to all questions about his well being.[3]

Speaking and Writing and Staying Silent

In an attempt to resolve his problems, Cho's parents took him to church. According to a pastor at Centreville Korean Presbyterian Church, Cho was a smart student who understood the Bible, but he had great difficulties talking to other people. The pastor added that, until he saw the video that Cho had sent to NBC News, he never heard him say a complete sentence.

The priest's remark is a reminder of the fact that Cho's inability to speak to others did not originate from a form of autism, or from an inability to elaborate ideas and emotions. On the contrary, Cho's writings and video production, as evident in the media package he sent to NBC, are testament to his eloquence.

His extreme shyness should be interpreted as a symptom of something else.

We should not forget that Cho moved from Korea to the United States when he was eight years old. The language of his childhood was Korean, and overnight he was obliged to interact in a new linguistic environment. At school, Cho was expected to write in a language that he could not speak, while at home he listened to and spoke a language that he could not write. The language of operational interaction, for him, was different from the language of affection and intimacy. This experience of linguistic dissociation might have played a significant role in the development of Cho's mental distress – which led him first to be hospitalized, then to be diagnosed with a severe anxiety disorder known as selective mutism, and finally to be diagnosed with major depressive disorder.

Yet Cho's dissociation is not a unique or even a rare case among younger generations that often grow up in situations of cultural and linguistic deterritorialization. Cho's experience is possibly only an extreme form of that dissociation of language and affection which is generally widespread among those who are learning more words from a machine than they do from their mothers. A paralysis of empathic relations, and an increasing fragility of the common ground of interpersonal understanding, are becoming common features in the psycho-scape of our time.

In the case of Cho, such disassociation went hand in hand with the extreme alienation he felt towards his new, American environment. These feelings found clear expression in several pieces of fiction which he wrote as class assignments, and particularly in the one-act play *Richard McBeef*, written just one year before his deadly rampage. The play focuses on the relationship between thirteen-year-old John, whose father had died in a boating accident, and his stepfather Richard 'Dick' McBeef, an ex-football player who can be read as a representation of Cho's new step-fatherland, America.

When Richard touches John's lap during an attempt at a 'father-to-son' talk, the boy abruptly claims that his stepfather is molesting him. John then accuses his stepfather of having murdered his actual father and repeatedly threatens that he will kill Richard.

John, Richard and Sue (John's mother) are suddenly embroiled in a major argument. Richard retreats to his car to escape the conflict, but John, despite claiming repeatedly that Richard was abusing him, joins his stepfather in the car and harasses him.

The play ends with John trying to shove a banana-flavoured cereal bar into his stepfather's throat; Richard, hitherto a passive character, reacts 'out of sheer desecrated hurt and anger' by 'swinging a deadly blow' at the boy.

In another play, *Mr. Brownstone*, Cho also described mistreatments, violence and hatred. The same themes recur in a short piece of fiction also written in

2006, in which Cho described a mass murder in a school. Indeed, already in 1999, on the eve of the Columbine massacre, Cho wrote a disturbing paper in English class that drew an instant reaction from his teacher. Cho's written words expressed generalized thoughts of suicide and homicide, suggesting that he wanted to re-enact the massacre at Columbine.

One wonders how the school authorities failed to understand that the young man was undergoing severe problems that could make him a danger to himself and others, even though he was not the autistic person that someone had previously diagnosed. Above all, one wonders how a young person such as Cho, who had been hospitalized for symptoms of depression and shown clear signs of psychic frailty, could easily and legally buy a .22 calibre Walther P22 semi-automatic pistol and a 9mm Glock 19 semi-automatic pistol before returning home to prepare a carnage.

In February 2007, Cho began purchasing the weapons that he would later put to such deadly effect. First he bought the Walther P22 semi-automatic pistol from a federally licensed online firearms dealer, before purchasing the Glock 19 semi-automatic pistol from Roanoke Firearms, a licensed gun dealer in Roanoke, Virginia. Cho also bought jacketed hollow-point bullets, which result in greater tissue damage than full metal jacket bullets against unarmoured targets by expanding upon entering soft tissue. Along with the pictures and videos, in the package that Cho later sent to NBC News there was also a picture of a bullet, with the caption 'All the [shit] you've given me, right back at you with hollow points.'

We Just Slept in the Same Room

Despite his refusal to communicate with others, Cho was occasionally forced to read out some of his assignments to the class. One of these pieces, which Cho read from his desk in a voice that was hardly perceptible, was a dark, violent response to his poetry class, defined as an 'animal massacre butcher shop'. Titled 'So-Called Advanced Creative Writing – Poetry', this paper expressed his rage at his teacher and fellow students, who had spent time talking about eating animals, instead of talking about poetry.

> I don't know which uncouth, low-life planet you come from but you disgust me. In fact, you all disgust me … You low-life barbarians make me sick to the stomach that I wanna barf over my new shoe. If you despicable human beings who are all disgraces to [the] human race keep this up, before you know it you will turn into cannibals – eating little babies, your friends. I

> hope y'all burn in hell for mass murdering and eating all those little animals.

Cho is simply disgusted by his animal-eating colleagues and teachers, who, according to him, are like aliens from a low-life distant planet. He is speaking as a stranger among strangers, as a civilized person among barbarians, or (which turns out to be the same) as a barbarian among civilized persons. His ranting has a moral undertone that seems to echo Allen Ginsberg's poem *C'mon Pigs of Western Civilization*, where society is described as an inextricable orgy of food, drink, pills, vomit, global suffering and relentless exploitation.

Similarly, Cho appears to be a frail person who feels as offended by the trivial and aggressive energy of teachers and students as by the characters of a television broadcast. The surrounding world, the daily life of those he is associated with, seem to him to constitute a noisy, violent, insensitive environment. And his rare attempts at interacting with this world are destined always to be inappropriate, as if almost necessarily lost in translation.

> The students had attended parties together at the beginning of the semester and it was at this young woman's room that Cho had produced a knife and stabbed the carpet. While the student no longer saw Cho socially, she had received instant messages and postings to her Facebook page throughout the semester that she believed were from him. The messages were not threatening, but, rather, self-deprecating. She would write back in a positive tone and inquire if she were responding to Cho. The reply would be 'I do not know who I am.' In early December, she found a quote from Romeo and Juliet written on the white erase board outside her dorm room. It read:

> ' a name
> :now not how to tell thee who I am
> y name, dear saint is hateful to myself
> :cause it is an enemy to thee
> ıd I it written, I would tear the word.

> The young woman shared with her father her concerns about the communications that she believed were from Cho. The father spoke with his friend, the chief of police for Christiansburg, who advised that the campus police should be informed.[4]

Cho is an alien, a monster, a totally incomprehensible being, and a disturbing enigma for his colleagues, for that bunch of podgy smiling young men and

women wearing the same Nike shoes and the same horrible sweatshirts taking Prozac and Ritalin and Xanax in order to hide their inner conformist hell.

Cho is alone.

Who would want to talk with such an Un-American guy? Americans are happy people, they are not so bleak, so unwelcoming, so depressing. And Cho is not friendly at all. He does not want to talk to anybody. Only, sometimes he leaves strange notes with uncanny words: 'Cho's senior year roommate explained to the panel that he tried speaking to Cho at the beginning of the semester, but Cho barely responded. "I hardly knew the guy; we just slept in the same room." '[5]

3-Iron

A young man goes to the automatic teller machine. The machine does not work. He cannot get his money. He needs money because he wants to pump some gasoline from the gas station. The machine still refuses to work. He gets nervous. The young man enters the bank, rushes to the bank teller, hurriedly jostling a man in his forties – a tough guy who reacts with brutality, hurling and punching the young man.

The young man gets up, looks around, mortified, then leaves the bank.

He enters his car, and stays there for a while in astonishment. Humiliation, rage. Someone behind him sounds the horn. He is obstructing the pump.

The screen goes black for a second.

This is how the Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke has constructed his film *71 Fragments of a Chronology of Chance*: as a montage of short scenes, fragments of a mass murder.

Following fragment: the young man re-enters the bank. This time he has a gun in his right hand. He fires rapidly – two, three, four times – aiming at the unfortunate employees and customers who are crowding the space.

He then walks out of the bank into the busy road, directing the weapon at the drivers of oncoming cars. Traffic jam. The young man enters his car again, and shoots himself to death.

Murderous rage can accumulate for years and then break out in a moment, without notice.

> In their last phone call with him the night of April 15, 2007, Cho's sister had no inkling that anything was wrong. Cho had called for their usual Sunday night arrangement. He appeared to be calm. 'No I do not need any money.'

He said to his parents, 'I love you.'[6]

Cho's lonely rage grows, like the rage of Oh Dae-su, in Park Chan-Wook's film *Oldboy*. The film follows the story of Oh Dae-su, who is kidnapped the night of his young daughter's birthday and is placed in solitary confinement in a hotel-like prison. No explanation is given for his imprisonment, and through the news he comes to know of the death of his wife and of being accused of having killed her. He is imprisoned for fifteen years, then released with no words of explanation.

During those years, after attempting and failing to kill himself, Oh Dae-su spends his time punching the walls in order to harden his fists. He prepares for the vengeance. When he is freed he is a bomb of irrepressible violence.

When considering Cho, *Oldboy*, along with another Korean movie, *3-Iron* by Kim Ki-duk, may prove instructive. This film is not about violence, but about frailty: the frail life of the generation of loners who have grown up in the age of precariousness and telematic isolation.

Tae-Suk drives around on his motorbike, taping takeout menus over the keyholes of front doors and breaking into apartments where the menus have not been removed. He lives in the apartments while the owners are away, even washing their clothes and mending broken appliances for them. Precarious dwellings for the silent, thin, careless young person who is the symbol of those who are non-existing (the virtual, unemployed, futureless generation), those who have learned more words from a machine than from their mother. One day his eyes meet the eyes of Sun-Hwa, an abused housewife, and they start a silent relationship, living together and moving from one apartment to another.

Taken together, frailty and violence are two of the most visibly recurrent themes in these key works of contemporary South Korean cinema. This should come as no surprise: the young South Korean generation can be regarded as the epitome of the contemporary condition of lonely togetherness, of shared isolation.

1 Virginia Tech Review Panel, 'Mental Health History of Seung Hui Cho', *Mass Shootings at Virginia Tech: Report of the Review Panel*, August 2007, washingtonpost.com.

2 Excerpts from Seung-Hui Cho's manifesto have been taken from a transcript available at schoolshooters.info.

3 Virginia Tech Review Panel, 'Mental Health History of Seung Hui Cho', *Mass Shootings at Virginia Tech*.

4 Virginia Tech Review Panel, *Mass Shootings at Virginia Tech*, p. 49.

5 Ibid., p. 51.

6 Ibid.

Chapter 5

What Is a Crime?

The words ‘crime’ and ‘crisis’ share the same etymology. Both refer to the Greek word *krisis* meaning ‘judgment, selection, separation’. We define crisis as a situation in which the traditional norms loosen their grasp on reality, while new norms have yet to become established. Crisis, therefore, presents a situation in which the natural law is out of joint, and crime spreads.

In *The Purge*, a 2013 science fiction thriller written and directed by James DeMonaco, crime is shown as a way to overcome crises, and to establish a new order, at once criminal and normal. The film is set in the year 2022, and presents the United States as a nation reborn. The Founding Fathers have returned, and have established a new rule to save the country from unemployment, recession and widespread restlessness. Following their suggestion, the government has instituted a yearly period of twelve hours called ‘the purge’, during which all criminal actions are allowed: murder, rape, mass violence, robbery. Thanks to this cathartic night, thanks to this annual discharge of compressed energy, the country has entered a new era of prosperity. Unemployment rates are hitting an all-time low, the economy is flourishing, and people are peaceful and caring all year long. The crisis of a society based on exploitation and violence can be eased and resolved by the institutionalization of crime. In DeMonaco’s movie, the morbidity of capitalist normalcy is exposed and presented as criminal normalcy. Only apparently marginal, violence is in fact the utmost law, dictating the daily exchange between work and salary, time and money. Crime is normal, for those who draw their power and their affluence from it.

Semiocapital and the Ethics of Baroque

Crime used to be a secret act. In the age of repression and industriousness, when the morality of the bourgeoisie was reigning, crime wanted to be secret. Law aimed at preventing crime, and it encouraged investigations of criminals in

order to punish them.

This order of things has irrevocably changed in the last turn of time, especially since the advent of the semiocapitalist regime.

Semiocapitalim occupies the sphere of randomness of value, as well as the sphere of randomness of law and of moral judgement.

> The entire strategy of the system lies in this hyper-reality of floating values. It is the same for money and theory as for the unconscious. Value rules according to an ungraspable order: the generation of models, the indefinite chaining of simulation. Cybernetic operationality, the genetic code, the random order of mutations, the principle of uncertainty, and so on: all of these replace a determinist and objectivist science, a dialectical vision of history and consciousness.[1]

Baudrillard is talking of value in economic terms. In the post-Fordist transition, the relation between work-time and value is jeopardized, as immaterial production and cognitive work are difficult to properly gauge. But the random effect is not limited to the sphere of the economy, as it spreads both to the sphere of social relations and to that of ethics.

The current, generalized perception of widespread corruption is neither a superficial impression, nor the effect of a deterioration of the moral character of people. It is a systemic effect of the randomization of value. When value can no longer be determined by the precise relation to work-time, its determinant factors become deception, swindle, violence. Mafia ceases to be a marginal phenomenon of lawlessness, instead becoming the prevailing force of emerging capitalist economies like Russia and Mexico. At the same time, fraud is legalized and organized in the global financial market as a systemic feature.

As it becomes increasingly institutionalized, crime loses its secrecy and demands access to the spectacle. The visibility of crime becomes part of the effectiveness and persuasiveness of power. Competition is all about subduing, cheating, predating. Blaming the victims is part of the game: you are guilty of your inability to subdue, to cheat and to plunder, therefore you will be submitted to the blackmail of debt and to the tyranny of austerity.

Nazism already enacted spectacular crime as a means to secure absolute power, but the criminal acts conducted in the name of the ‘Final Solution’ were secretly organized and performed away from the public eye. Evil was proclaimed and simultaneously denied in the name of the superior values of family, homeland and God. On the contrary, reclaiming evil has become commonplace in today’s financial markets, as the old ethics of bourgeois Protestantism is progressively cancelled by the neo-baroque, post-bourgeois ethics of the

deterritorialized financial class.

The bourgeoisie was a strongly territorialized class, whose power was based on the property of physical assets, and on the fact of belonging to a stable community. Protestant ethics was based on the long-lasting relationship between the religious community and the labourers and consumers who shared the same place and the same destiny.

Nowadays, the bourgeoisie has disappeared. The financial deterritorialization is generating a post-bourgeois class, which has no relation to the territory and to community. It is a class that is not concerned with the future of any specific territorial community, because tomorrow it will move its business to a different part of the world. We might call it the 'elsewhere class', as it continuously displaces the stakes of its investment. But we may also call it a 'virtual class', for two reasons: because it is the class that gains profits from virtual activities, like net trading, and high tech immaterial production; and because it is the class that does not actually exist. Identifying those who are investing in the financial market is difficult, impossible, as everybody is obliged to depend on it.

In a sense, everybody is part of the class that is investing in the financial market. Including myself. As a teacher I am bound to wait for a pension, and I know that my pension will be paid if some investment funds will be profitable, therefore I am obliged to depend for my future revenue on the profitability of the financial market. The 'elsewhere class' has re-established the economic rationale of the rentier, as profit is no longer linked to the expansion of the existing wealth, but is linked to the mere possession of an invisible asset: money, or, more accurately, credit.

According to Thomas Stewart:

> Money has dematerialized. Once upon a time officials of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York were loading gold bars onto trolleys and rolled them from one country's basement to another. Today some 1.3 trillion in currency is traded every day, and never takes a tangible form.
>
> Money has turned ethereal, volatile and electronic. Nothing more than an assemblage of ones and zeros that are piped through miles of wire, pumped over fiber-optic highways, bounced off satellites, and beamed from one microwave relay station to another. This new money is like a shadow. It has no tactile dimension, no heft or weight. Money is an image.[2]

The post-bourgeois class of virtual finance has no homeland, no community, no belonging, and also no money. Just faith. Faith in signs, in figures. The post-bourgeois class announces the return of the baroque.

Although defeated and marginalized during the age of bourgeois progress and

the rational organization of social life, the baroque has never disappeared.

Its spirit is based on the primacy of the spectacle, on the multiplication of possible interpretations, on randomness of value and of meaning, or the potency of arbitrary and violent will. Not surprisingly, Curzio Malaparte, a writer who took part in Italian Fascism before changing his position during the Second World War, in *Europa vivente*, published in 1925, speaks of Italian Fascism as a return of the baroque. Northern Europeans are wrong to think that modernity is only a Protestant business, says Malaparte. Fascism is the reclaiming of the modern soul of Southern Europeans, and the political spectacle of Mussolini is the resurgence of the baroque cult of inessentiality, decoration, excess: arbitrary power.

But arbitrariness is not only a defining feature of Fascism, it is also the quintessential character of the semiocapitalist form of accumulation. The power of the resurgent baroque is fully exposed by the transformation of the economy into semioproduction. When language, imagination, information and immaterial flows become the force of production and the general space of exchange, when property is deterritorialized and becomes immaterial, the baroque spirit becomes the all-encompassing form, both of the economy and of ethical discourse.

God and Crime

During the Beijing trial against the Gang of Four, the group of ultra-Maoist leaders of the Cultural Revolution who were accused of killings and massive political violence, Zhang Chunqiao, the Shanghai intellectual who had been the prime agitator in a violent anti-Confucian campaign, declared to the jury: 'I refuse. I refuse. I refuse'. Jiang Qing, the wife of Chairman Mao and major Communist Party figure in her own right, defiantly asked: 'What is a crime?'

Crime is always an act that is subject to the judgement of the law. As is also revealed by the etymology of the English word, from the Greek *krino* and the Latin *cernere*, crime is an act that has to be discriminated upon and judged. Yet, this connection between crime and judgement reveals the problematic importance of defining the precise standpoint from which such a judgement can be issued. Here lies the strategic value of the question asked by Mao's last wife. By asking 'What is a crime?' Jian Qing meant: you, judges co-opted by the new Chinese order of the capitalist Restoration, you, anti-Maoist reactionary Confucians, you think that order is the supreme value, but I do not think so, because I believe that there is a principle which is superior to the order of the law.

In the vision of Jiang Qing, this principle is the establishment of a proletarian dictatorship through class warfare, even at the cost of sacrificing countless human lives. While sharing Jiang Qing's diffidence towards the established law, a modern Humanist perspective would propose a different founding principle, and thus a different conception of crime. According to a Humanist sensibility, a crime is as an act that is aimed at destroying life and the possibilities of a happy life, rather than merely an act against the law. Because the order of the law often contradicts the possibility of life, Humanists tend to believe that an act against the law may be forgiven, if it is aimed at protecting life.

Observed from this point of view, the current economic order loses all of its supposed legitimacy and moral neutrality, and clearly emerges as a criminal system. Although it would be an exaggeration to say that corporate leaders and their political executives act like psychopathic mass murderers, it is possible to state with confidence that both are immersed in the same nihilist vision, in the same aura of suicide.

On 14 March 2012, the high-level Goldman Sachs executive Greg Smith sent a letter titled 'Why I Am Leaving Goldman Sachs' to the *New York Times*. In his letter, Smith offered an insider account of the world of contemporary, predatory finance.

> Today is my last day at Goldman Sachs. After almost 12 years at the firm – first as a summer intern while at Stanford, then in New York for 10 years, and now in London – I believe I have worked here long enough to understand the trajectory of its culture, its people and its identity. And I can honestly say that the environment now is as toxic and destructive as I have ever seen it. To put the problem in the simplest terms, the interests of the client continue to be side-lined in the way the firm operates and thinks about making money. Goldman Sachs is one of the world's largest and most important investment banks and it is too integral to global finance to continue to act this way. The firm has veered so far from the place I joined right out of college that I can no longer in good conscience say that I identify with what it stands for … I knew it was time to leave when I realized I could no longer look students in the eye and tell them what a great place this was to work.[3]

Smith's letter is full of platitudes. Ethics and finance have never had much in common, and the pride of a financial agent has always been in extracting value from social activities, while the clients of Goldman Sachs have generally been callous people. Also, one might wonder why it took Smith twelve years to become aware of the cynicism and destructiveness of the corporation.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to dismiss it as the expression of one man's personal frustration, like the magazine *Forbes* did in an article titled 'Greg Smith Isn't a Whistle-blower, He's Just a Goldman Sachs Executive Having a Midlife Crisis'. In fact, Smith's letter tells a story that goes far beyond an account of his personal experience: Smith tells the story of a new form of crime that has transcended itself.

In November 2009, Goldman Sachs's CEO Lloyd Craig Blankfein declared in an interview to the *Sunday Times*: 'I'm doing God's work.' A few days later he apologized for the remark and said that he had intended it as a joke. Of course, Blankfein should not have apologized. He was simply meaning that whatever happens on Earth (pollution, wars, the irrational distribution of resources, the corporate appropriation of the product of the daily activity of hundreds of millions of workers) is supervised by people like himself (Blankfein) and his collaborators. Indeed, he *is* doing God's work, and God does His job as He likes.

Over the last few years, Greg Smith's former company earned huge profits, first from the expansion of the American mortgage bubble and the European bubble of sovereign debt, and then again from the – almost simultaneous – bursting of these bubbles on either side of the Atlantic. Subsequently, Goldman Sachs proceeded to secure influence over some of the key political positions in the Italian, Greek and Spanish governments, in order to predate further on these countries after having driven them to the brink of disaster.

The role of Goldman Sachs as one of the principal architects of the crisis in Greece was particularly remarkable. As was revealed in 2010, not only they had helped the Greek government to conceal the true state of the country's finances, but at the same time they had also bet against Greece's sovereign debt, hoping for its default. As a consequence, in a matter of weeks millions of Greek people saw their livelihoods utterly disintegrate, while the country sank into a state of widespread humanitarian emergency, as industries closed, hospitals ran out of medicine, and the suicide rate sky-rocketed.

But who can judge the job of God?

Job

> In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. He had seven sons and three daughters, and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of

the East.

His sons used to hold feasts in their homes on their birthdays, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would make arrangements for them to be purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, 'Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts'. This was Job's regular custom.

One day, the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came with them. The Lord said to Satan, 'Where have you come from?'

Satan answered the Lord, 'From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it.'

Then the Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant, Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil'.

'Does Job fear God for nothing?' Satan replied. 'Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.'

The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.'

Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord.

One day when Job's sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, a messenger came to Job and said, 'The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, and the Sabeans attacked and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!'

While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, 'The fire of God fell from the heavens and burned up the sheep and the servants, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!'

While he was still speaking, another messenger came and said, 'The Chaldeans formed three raiding parties and swept down on your camels and made off with them. They put the servants to the sword, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!'

While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, 'Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother's house, when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!'

At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said:

'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.'

In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.[4]

Nihilism

Financial capitalism seems to be driven by a form of nihilism. It is worth exploring the philosophical implications of this word, whose root is the Latin word for 'nothing', *nihil*. In Nietzsche, the concept of nihilism refers to the absence of an ontological foundation of judgement. In his vision, moral judgement is not based on a metaphysical basis, but on the will of men.

In *The Dawn of Day* the philosopher writes:

> The illusion of the moral order of the Universe. –There is no 'eternal justice' which requires that every fault shall be atoned and paid for, –the belief that such a justice existed was a terrible delusion, and useful only to a limited extent; just as it is also a delusion that everything is guilt which is felt as such. It is not the things themselves, but the opinions about things that do not exist, which have been such a source of trouble to mankind.[5]

According to Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche's thought, the absence of a metaphysical truth, and the consequent lack of objectively existing moral values, confers the responsibility of knowledge and moral choice to the act of interpretation, and to the act of will. We could call this conception a form of 'hermeneutic nihilism'.

This form of nihilism assumes that the conceptual activity is based on the ontological *nihil*. In this conception, this form of nihilism has a positive and constructive implication, as the condition of moral freedom and of conceptual creation. *Nihil* is the starting point of the conceptual and practical process, and from this starting point the conceptual and historical activity of men is responsible for the creation and meaning of the world as we know it.

The form of nihilism that seems to prevail in the culture and practice of the ruling class today is quite different from this constructive, hermeneutic nihilism. We could call it a form of 'annihilating nihilism', since it actively produces *nihil* as its effect.

Hermeneutic nihilism originated from the realization that the world is not a place in which an ontological essence is embodied, or a moral truth is revealed,

but the place where meaning is continually created by the conscious activity of men. Conversely, annihilating nihilism actively destroys the shared values (both moral values and economic values) produced in the past by human production and democratic political regulation, in order to affirm the primacy of the abstract force of money.

Annihilating nihilism is a peculiar phenomenon – the product of financial capitalism. In the sphere of financial capitalism, destroying concrete wealth is the easiest way to accumulate abstract value.

The credit default swap (CDS) is the best example of this transformation of life, resources and language into *nihil*. The CDS is a contract in which the buyer of the CDS makes a series of payments to the seller and, in exchange, receives a pay-off if an instrument – typically a bond or loan – goes into default (fails to pay). Less commonly, the credit event that triggers the pay-off can be the restructuring or bankruptcy of a company, or even simply the downgrading of its credit rating.

If the financial game is based on the premise that the value of money invested will increase as things are annihilated (if factories are dismantled, jobs are destroyed, people die, cities crumble, and so on), this type of financial profiteering is essentially constructed upon a bet on the degradation of the world.

From a Humanist perspective, finance reveals itself as an ideal form of crime, actively establishing suicide at the core of the social game.

Absolute Capitalism

How should we define the contemporary economic system?

I reject the expression 'cognitive capitalism', since only labour can be defined as cognitive. Capital is not the subject of cognitive activity: it is only its exploiter. The bearer of knowledge, creativity and skills is the cognitive worker.

I also avoid the definitions of 'monetarism' and of 'neoliberal capitalism', which seem to me to be inaccurate despite their widespread use. The variation in money supply was only a technical aspect, and Neoliberalism only the ideological justification, of an epochal transformation that took place in the last decades of the twentieth century.

In the context of a long-term anthropological evolution, contemporary capitalism can be understood as the turning point beyond the age of Humanism. The modern bourgeoisie embodied the values of Humanist freedom from theological destiny, and bourgeois capitalism was a product of the Humanist

revolution. But the combined effect of a preponderance of capital accumulation and of the deterritorialization of the production process have led to the end of the bourgeois characterization of the economic system. The production and exchange of abstract signs has taken the predominant place in the overall process of accumulation: semiocapitalism has taken the place of industrial capitalism. Financial abstraction is only the extreme manifestation of the predominance of semiosis in comparison with physical production.

Semiocapitalism is, for me, a suitable definition of the present economic system at the global level. However, if we intend to grasp the political dimension of the transformation that Neoliberal deregulation has brought about, I think that it would be more correct to speak of 'capitalist absolutism'.

The English word 'absolute' descends from the Latin *ab-solutus*, a term translatable as 'emancipated from any limitation'. In this context, 'absolute' means not limited by restrictions, unconditional, unconstrained by constitutional or other provisions.

The bourgeoisie fought a battle against early modern absolutism, after taking advantage of the effects of national unification and social regulation that absolutist monarchs enforced on traditional societies. The bourgeois struggle against monarchic absolutism was part of the battle for the liberation of privately owned enterprise from the control of the state, but also for the limitation of the monarch's actions under the rule of law.

Once it managed to impose the rule of law over the power of the feudal aristocracy and of the monarch, the bourgeoisie also accepted a legal limitation to its own economic expansion. The bourgeoisie could not be indifferent to the destiny of the territory or the community of workers, which was obviously linked to the destiny of its own investments. Workers and the bourgeoisie shared the same urban space, and the same future. If the economy crumbled, it was a disgrace also for the owner, although it was a much worse disgrace for the workers and their families. This is why the bourgeois class accepted the democratic deal, and the negotiation with the working class.

The rise of financial capitalism, the deterritorialization of production and exchange, and finally the emergence of a virtual class without territorial identity have been accompanied by a general process of deregulation. The globalization of corporate trade hindered and rendered impossible any all-encompassing legal control on their activity. The sovereignty of nation states made way for global corporations acting with absolute freedom, disregarding the local authority and shifting their immaterial assets from one location to another. This is particularly evident in reference to the environmental crisis, as the legal limits to the exploitation of physical resources and the pollution of the environment are systematically (and ultimately, suicidally) ignored by corporations.

At the same time, the globalization of the labour market destroyed the unionized power of workers, and opened the way to a general reduction of salaries, increased exploitation and the erosion of regulations covering working conditions and working hours.

This is why I believe that the contemporary global system should be defined as one of absolute capitalism, in which the only effective principles are those of value-accumulation, profit-growth and economic competition. These are its all-encompassing priorities, and the overwhelming impetus at its core. All other concerns, including the survival of the planet or the future of the next generation, are subsumed to these greater goals.

Compared to the past situation of bourgeois industrial capitalism, the relationship between social welfare and financial profit is now inverted. In the industrial economy, profits increased when citizens acquired enough money to buy the goods that were produced in the factories. In the sphere of financial capitalism, financial indicators go up only if social welfare crumbles and salaries fall.

Unsurprisingly, those few hundred billionaires listed in *Forbes* magazine have hugely increased their capital in 2010, 2011 and 2012, years which were dramatically marked by rising unemployment, poverty and cuts to social welfare.

Far from emancipating society from any rule, Neoliberal deregulation has emancipated capital from the political law and social needs, while subjecting society to the blind adherence to the law of financial accumulation. It has marked the beginning of an age of capitalist absolutism, in which capital accumulation and particularly financial accumulation are entirely independent (*ab-solutus*, untied) from the social interest.

In this way, the Humanist tradition, which was based on the idea that human destiny is not subjected to any theological law or necessity, is finally obliterated.

1 Jean Baudrillard, 'Symbolic exchange and death' in *Selected Writings*, p. 122.

2 Thomas Stewart, *Intellectual Capital*.

3 Greg Smith, 'Why I Am Leaving Goldman Sachs', *New York Times*, 14 March 2012.

4 Job 1:1–22, New Living Translation.

5 Part V, §563, p. 39.

Chapter 6

The Automaton

Twenty-second of July 2011. At 3.25 p.m. a powerful bomb explodes in the centre of Oslo. Glass windows shatter all around, buildings in a wide area are damaged. Eight people are killed on the spot, dozens are wounded.

Around 4.30 p.m., a man in a police uniform lands on Utøya Island. Six hundred and fifty members of the youth wing of the Norwegian Labour Party are gathered on the island, at an annual summer camp. The man in the uniform approaches the young campers, telling them that he is there for security reasons, following the explosions in Oslo which had happened a few hours before. Then, suddenly, he extracts a weapon and begins indiscriminately shooting in every direction. He kills dozens, chasing his victims through the woods, pushing them into the cold waters of the sea. The police arrive one hour after the first alarm call. Upon seeing the officers approaching, the gunman promptly surrenders and hails them as 'my brothers'. His name is Anders Behring Breivik, and he does not want to die, preferring instead to enjoy his newly acquired global fame. In one day, through two separate terrorist attacks, he has killed seventy-seven people – of which thirty-three were minors – and injured over three hundred others.

In August 2012, Breivik is sentenced to twenty-one years in prison for mass murder. Psychiatrists appointed by the court express different evaluations of the case: one team diagnoses Breivik with paranoid schizophrenia, but a second team of psychiatrists concludes that he was not psychotic during the murderous actions.

The interesting point to note in the psychiatrists' evaluation, however, is the diagnosis of alexithymia, which is the inability to recognize and describe one's own feelings. This is an extreme form of un-empathy, which annuls not only the ability to perceive other people's suffering, but also blurs and attenuates emotional self-perception. The human being is transformed into a sort of automaton. During the court hearings and the psychiatric examinations, Breivik seems to be disconnected from himself. Observing him read his declarations, one has the impression that he is not speaking about himself, but about a machine, or a computer. According to his account of the massacre, as his brain became

bombarded by impressions he 'lost access to his databases', 'deleting' images of murderous details, and continuing with the massacre 'on autopilot'. He considered the possibility of 'self-termination', but instead he decided to surrender to the police and to continue his atrocity exhibition.

At the end of the trial, the court rules that the murderer was mentally sane while committing his crime.

A Neo-Conservative Killer

The previous accounts of mass murderers in this book have primarily described people who suffer: Seung-Hui Cho, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold were essentially suffering people who performed mass murder with the intention of being killed in order to be released from the intolerable burden of their life. Their murderous acts must be analysed from the point of view of their pain, which by no means reduces or justifies the horror of their deeds.

Breivik is different. Of course, he also must have suffered in the course of his life, to the point of erasing the perception of his own feelings and emotions. But when it came to performing his mass murder he acted coldly, in the name of ideological, religious and political values. Before committing the massacre, Breivik composed a sort of 'manifesto', titled *2083: A European Declaration of Independence*. This text is largely an exercise in cutting-and-pasting from the internet, complemented with a collection of the author's own considerations, opinions and autobiographical accounts. The *European Declaration of Independence* is the work of a man who has an average level of culture and who can be defined as a moderate conservative, or a neo-conservative. Even though his actions and his moral profile are clearly influenced by the style of the Nazis, Breivik explicitly dissociates himself from Nazism.

His basic idea can be summarized like this: Marxism – the essential enemy of European identity – has changed its nature in the last decades of the twentieth century, shifting from 'economic Marxism' to 'cultural Marxism', as a result of sexual freedom and a form of political correctness which translates into relativism and tolerance towards the enemies of Christian Europe. Thanks to the destruction of the traditional family, the feminization of Western society and the relativist subservience to the enemies of West, cultural Marxism is jeopardizing the very foundations of Western civilization.

According to Breivik:

> Multiculturalism (cultural Marxism/political correctness), as you might know, is the root cause of the ongoing Islamisation of Europe which has

resulted in the ongoing Islamic colonisation of Europe through demographic warfare (facilitated by our own leaders). This compendium presents the solutions and explains exactly what is required of each and every one of us in the coming decades. Everyone can and should contribute in one way or the other; it's just a matter of will.

Time is of the essence. We have only a few decades to consolidate a sufficient level of resistance before our major cities are completely demographically overwhelmed by Muslims. Ensuring the successful distribution of this compendium to as many Europeans as humanly possible will significantly contribute to our success. It may be the only way to avoid our present and future *dhimmitude* (enslavement) under Islamic majority rule in our own countries.[1]

Only a few days after the Utøya massacre, Mario Borghezio, a representative of the Italian Northern League and member of the European Parliament, lauded Anders Breivik's manifesto. Live on Italian state radio, Borghezio claimed that he shared Breivik's 'opposition to Islam', including his call for a 'crusade' by Christians against Europe's 'drift toward Islam'. He then added that positions like Breivik's 'account for 20 per cent of votes in Europe', and that '100 million people think this way'. In a separate interview with *Il Sole-24* radio station, Mr Borghezio declared that the ideas expressed by Breivik are generally 'good – barring the violence – and some of them are great'.

I don't think that Borghezio is far from the truth when he asserts that 100 million Europeans would agree with Breivik's thought, as espoused in his *Declaration*. The text of the murderer perfectly expresses the feelings and opinions of a large portion of the European people, not to mention Americans. These opinions are not the product of madness or of a crazy delirium, but the rational neo-conservative elaborations of a right-wing idiot who thinks that European identity is based on the Christian faith and that Islam is the worst enemy of Europe, which has to be confronted and rejected by any means necessary. What Breivik writes might be signed in full and almost without correction by the neo-conservative intellectuals and the Tea Party militants of the United States.

It is hard to understand why the killer of Utøya decided to begin his anti-Islam crusade by murdering young women and men gathered in peaceful discussion, but we should not forget that those young people were the new generation of the Norwegian Labour Party, and therefore, in his eyes, disguised communists, cultural Marxists, allies of the Islamic invader.

In his *Declaration of Independence*, Breivik writes:

> Most Europeans look back on the 1950s as a good time. Our homes were safe, to the point where many people did not bother to lock their doors. Public schools were generally excellent, and their problems were things like talking in class and running in the halls. Most men treated women like ladies, and most ladies devoted their time and effort to making good homes, rearing their children well and helping their communities through volunteer work. Children grew up in two-parent households, and the mother was there to meet the child when he came home from school. Entertainment was something the whole family could enjoy.
>
> What happened? If a man of the 1950s were suddenly introduced into Western Europe in the 2000s, he would hardly recognize it as the same country. He would be in immediate danger of getting mugged, carjacked or worse, because he would not have learned to live in constant fear. He would not know that he shouldn't go into certain parts of the city, that his car must not only be locked but equipped with an alarm, that he dare not go to sleep at night without locking the windows and bolting the doors – and setting the electronic security system.
>
> If he brought his family with him, he and his wife would probably cheerfully pack their children off to the nearest public school. When the children came home in the afternoon and told them they had to go through a metal detector to get in the building, had been given some funny white powder by another kid and learned that homosexuality is normal.[2]

An obsessional fear of contamination, misogyny and Islamophobia are the essential features of many contemporary Western subcultures, and Breivik's text plainly expresses these feelings. Very much in tune with Joseph Ratzinger, the Pope who resigned in 2013, Anders Breivik identifies cultural relativism as a condition of the contemporary dissolution of the very foundations of Christian civilization. Without understanding much of what he refers to, the murderer quotes Derrida:

> Derridean deconstruction became a tool for these cultural critics. Simply stated, deconstruction is a school of thought that posits that words have no meaning. Instead, words have 'traces' of meaning. The meaning of a word is continually disappearing, leaving us with only the memory, or trace, of what that meaning once was.[3]

Furthermore, this relativism, in the eyes of Breivik, is responsible for the feminization of European society, which in turn is leading to the destruction of the traditional structures of Europe. Indeed, argues Breivik, feminism has paved

the way for the hostile penetration of Islam into the Western world. On this subject he quotes a well-known Norwegian right-wing blogger, writing under the nom de plume Fjordman.

> Today, the feminization of European culture, moving rapidly since the 1960s continues to intensify. Indeed, the present-day radical feminist assault through support for mass Muslim immigration has a political parallel to their anti-colonial efforts. This current assault is in part a continuation of a century-old effort to destroy traditional European structures, the very foundation of European culture.[4]

These kinds of platitudes are shared by a significant segment of the public in the West. The ideology and the sentiments that Breivik has expressed in his disgusting manifesto are largely the same as those held by the supporters of George W. Bush in the United States, Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, or David Cameron in the United Kingdom, for instance. Indeed, the fundamental political agenda of Mr Breivik is not so far removed from the agenda of conservative political movements the world over.

Identitarian Obsession

Most of the *European Declaration of Independence* is dedicated to an analysis of the historical crimes perpetrated by Muslims – as understood from their characterization on the internet. Breivik gathered pieces of historical information from online searches and recombined them in his text with the same degree of approximation and shallow analysis of the sources which typifies much online comment.

> The essence of multiculturalism is that all cultures and religions are 'equal'. In this context our Western governments launched a great 'campaign of deception' against their own people with the goal of creating a falsified version of the Islamic and European Civilization, in order to make them equal. According to them, this is needed in order to successfully implement multiculturalism. Islamists, Arab Nationalists and Marxist theorists have been at the forefront of falsifying our history since WW2. Especially Edward Said's book *Orientalism* published in 1978, has been the driving force in this process.[5]

Relativism, cultural Marxism and the negation of the true nature of Islam are

part of the same anti-Western ideological plot. According to Breivik, Islam has always been the sworn enemy of West, and Marxism's use of cultural relativism to overthrow the capitalist system does in fact serve the interests of the Muslims, ultimately leading to the downfall of Western civilization.

At issue here are the essential features of what is generally called fundamentalism, but might better be defined as an identitarian obsession: the self-identification as the 'chosen people', which implies as its complementary opposite the identification of the other as the enemy of the truth and of the good – that is, the personification of evil.

Fascism and Nazism

The terms Fascism and Nazism are often used as ambiguous signifiers. Their meaning is vaguely referable to extreme oppression, violence and authoritarianism, but it is difficult to define exactly what is meant by these provocative identifiers. Any historical overview of the first part of the twentieth century provides its own damning verdict on these political ideologies, but attempts to extract a general meaning from the thinking of Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler and their followers often founder in a labyrinth of identification.

What, in fact, *is* Fascism? In an article about Ur-Fascism, Umberto Eco writes:

> Fascism had no quintessence. Fascism was a fuzzy totalitarianism, a collage of different philosophical and political ideas, a beehive of contradictions. Can one conceive of a truly totalitarian movement that was able to combine monarchy with revolution, the Royal Army with Mussolini's personal *milizia*, the grant of privileges to the Church with state education extolling violence, absolute state control with a free market? The Fascist Party was born boasting that it brought a revolutionary new order; but it was financed by the most conservative among the landowners who expected from it a counter-revolution.
>
> At its beginning fascism was republican. Yet it survived for twenty years proclaiming its loyalty to the royal family, while the Duce (the unchallenged Maximal Leader) was arm-in-arm with the King, to whom he also offered the title of Emperor. But when the King fired Mussolini in 1943, the party reappeared two months later, with German support, under the standard of a 'social' republic, recycling its old revolutionary script, now enriched with almost Jacobin overtones.[6]

I would argue that Fascism is difficult to identify for the simple reason that its

core is exactly the obsession of identification. Rather than specific national, religious or ethnic identities, it is the very process of national identification, religious identification and ethnic identification that has led to dangerous historical game-playing, often culminating in war and slaughter.

Indeed, in order to deny all possibility of becoming a Fascist, one ought first to resist any pressure to identify oneself. Unfortunately, it is not always particularly easy to avoid identification, particularly when social survival is threatened, as all other people become essentially competitors in the labour market or competitors in the occupation of territory. It is not easy to escape identification when the social community is attacked and people are unable to organize themselves around their interests and political rights, particularly when social solidarity is weak or entirely abrogated. In these instances, people understandably experience the need to find a point of identification in the phantoms of identitarian belonging – and identitarian belonging cannot find any foundation but aggressiveness toward other groups.

These dynamics of identification and aggression can be better explored if we acknowledge the differences between the historical regimes of Italian Fascism and German Nazism, and relate them to what is happening in the current century. These differences are illuminated under consideration of the baroque Catholic cult of the inclusive community (*il fascio*, the bunch, the union of those who are part of the same '*populus*' and of the same nation) and the Gothic racist cult of the exclusive *Volk*. Nazism is essentially based on the negation of the human nature of the other, while Fascism is based on the aggressive inclusion of the other, and the punishment and extermination of those who refuse to be included.

Regarding the traces of extremism evident in the first decade of the twenty-first century, I would contend that Nazism is embodied by the social-Darwinist cult of competition and the subjugation of the human nature of those who perish as a result of the 'natural selection' of the market. Italian Fascism, on the other hand, is revived in the modern age by the resentful and vengeful spirit of the losers, those who are marginalized in the economic game of competition and who react under the banners of cultural identification. The present war between Western absolute capitalism and Islamic fundamentalism may be viewed as a war between Nazism and Fascism. This war is going to indelibly stain future decades, unless some – currently unimaginable – political invention will come to free us from this cultural killing field.

Financial capitalism is based on a process of unrelenting deterritorialization, and this is causing fear to spread among those who are unable to deal with the precariousness of daily life and the violence of the labour market. This fear in turn provokes a counter-effect of aggressive re-territorialization by those who try

to grasp some form of identity, some sense of belonging, because only a feeling of belonging offers the semblance of shelter, a form of protection. But belonging is a delusive projection of the mind, a deceptive sensation, a trap. Since one's belonging can only be conclusively proved by an act of aggression against the other, the combined effect of deterritorialization in the sphere of financial capitalism and of re-territorialization in the realm of identity is leading to a state of permanent war.

The Fatherless Civilization

Breivik is clearly obsessed with ethnic contamination, but of even greater concern to him is clearly his irrational perception of the unsettling presence of women, and particularly their freedom.

In a book dedicated to the Utøya massacre and to the personality of the slaughterer, Aage Borchgrevink describes the early childhood of Breivik, his schizogenic relation with his mother, the painful an-affectivity developed by the young man and the severe form of misogyny that he developed as crucial elements for an understanding of Breivik's ideological delirium.

According to Borchgrevink,

> [Breivik's] wish to control female sexuality and the female body, as well as replacing mothers with artificial wombs, may have to do less with his career as a loser on the sexual market and more with traumatic experiences from his childhood of being unwillingly sexualized by his only caregiver. Perhaps the problem was not his lack of access to the female body in adolescence or later, but his experience of having been invaded by it as a child.[7]

The main concern of the author of the *Declaration of Independence* is the feminization of Western culture, but also, more broadly, the feminization of pretty much anything. At points in his text, for instance, he asserts that he personally has been partially feminized by the matriarchal upbringing of his 'super-liberal family'. According to Breivik, 'Femininity is penetrating everywhere, and the feminization of European culture is nearly completed. Europe is a woman who would prefer to be raped than to risk serious injuries while resisting'.[8]

In Breivik's mind, women are dangerous for Western civilization because they are unstable, willing to betray the West and to surrender to the sexually aggressive masculinity of the Muslims. This hatred of women is linked with the idea that the patriarchal order that once gave Europe strength is now crumbling.

In Breivik's compendium we can read a text titled *The Fatherless Civilization*, which was originally written by Fjordman, the blogger Breivik repeatedly quotes with a sort of adoration.

One date recurs obsessively in Anders Breivik's text, as well as in the mind of conservative, Neoliberal reformers worldwide: the conflagratory year of 1968.

What is the primary meaning of '68? After two world wars, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in 1968, young people, students, workers, intellectuals and women asserted, among other things, that humans must emancipate from mental slavery, and that mental slavery is essentially based on subordination to the Father. The authority of the father was viewed not only as the key tool of patriarchal oppression, but also of colonial violence and of capitalist exploitation. Seen through the prism of 1968, refusing and defusing the authority of the father, the transmission of its oppressive law and the obedience to its traditions was the first step in a social and sexual liberation from slavery. In the following two decades, society attempted and often succeeded in creating fraternal links of solidarity and freeing itself from patriarchal subjection. That little trace of this social transformation is evidence today can be accredited to the Neoliberal counter-offensive, which swiftly destroyed social solidarity, obliterating the fraternal link with the law of competition. Since then, restoring the law of the father has been the main concern of popes, ayatollahs and neo-conservative alike.

Yet at the same time, capitalism in the age of deregulation has globalized the markets and mixed languages, deterritorialized production and culture, and therefore jeopardized the patriarchal family and the authority of the Father by ushering in a territory of the unconscious.

This is why the contemporary cultural power is deeply schizogenic: it is simultaneously reclaiming authority and destroying authoritativeness.

Anders Breivik is the standard-bearer of all the anticommunists of the world, all the fanatics of the capitalist Restoration, which is, first and foremost, the Restoration of the patriarchal law. But he is also very much troubled by the role of the Father(s).

> Lone parenthood stopped being a source of shame and turned instead into a woman's inalienable right. The state has provided more and more inducements to women – through child benefit, council flats and other welfare provision – to have children without committed fathers. This has produced generations of women-only households, where emotionally needy girls so often become hopelessly inadequate mothers who abuse and neglect their own children – who, in turn, perpetuate the destructive pattern. This is culturally nothing less than suicidal. I sometimes wonder whether the

> modern West, and Western Europe in particular, should be dubbed the Fatherless Civilisation. Fathers have been turned into a caricature and there is a striking demonisation of traditional male values. Any person attempting to enforce rules and authority, a traditional male preserve, is seen as a Fascist and ridiculed, starting with God the Father.[9]

When Anders was only one year old, his parents divorced and his mother remarried to an officer of the Norwegian army, Jens David Breivik. The early divorce of his parents and the deterritorialization of the early years of his life may well have been a cause of significant emotional distress.

Breivik writes that his father had severed contact with all of his children:

> He has four children but has cut contact with all of them so it is pretty clear whose fault that was. I don't carry any grudge but a couple of my half siblings do. The thing is that he is just not very good with people. I tried contacting him five years ago but he said he was not mentally prepared for a reunion due to various factors, his poor health being one.

Breivik's relationship with the second husband of his mother is also troubled, as he describes it:

> I still have contact with him although now he spends most his time (retirement) with prostitutes in Thailand. He is a very primitive sexual beast, but at the same time a very likeable and good guy. I can't say I approve of that lifestyle although I can't really blame him when I see today's Marxist social structures.

Both of Breivik's parents were inclined toward support for the Norwegian Labour Party, and he is critical of the way his mother raised him: 'I do not approve of the super-liberal, matriarchal upbringing as it completely lacked discipline and has contributed to feminizing me to a certain degree.'

In his early years, Anders also had negative experiences with Muslim gangs:

> Even at that time, the Muslim gangs were very dominating in Oslo East and in inner city Oslo. They even arranged 'raids' in Oslo West occasionally, subduing the native youths (*kuffars*) and collecting *Jizya* from them (in the form of cell phones, cash, sunglasses etc). I remember they systematically harassed, robbed and beat ethnic Norwegian youngsters who were unfortunate enough to not have the right affiliations. Muslim youths called the ethnic Norwegians *poteter* (potatoes, a derogatory term used by Muslims to describe ethnic Norwegians). These people occasionally raped the so-

called potato whores.

Breivik was a problematic child, and in one of the psychological reports of his behaviour there is a note about his peculiar smile, and the suggestion that it was not anchored in his emotions but was rather a deliberate response to the environment: 'Anders has become a contact-adverse, slightly anxious, passive child, but with a manic kind of defence, restlessly active and with a feigned aversive smile.'[10]

While it is unclear from his writings at what point the young man decided to go to war against the liberal parents and the feminizer mother, against the aggressive Muslims and against the tolerant West, we can see that, regarding sex and love, Breivik is predictably on the defensive. Declaring that he does not want to 'jeopardise his operation' by becoming involved with long-term girlfriends, he opts instead for a life committed to his perceived mission, and the avoidance of temptation.

He writes:

> As for girlfriends, I do get the occasional lead, or the occasional girl making a move, especially nowadays as I'm fit like hell and feel great. But I'm trying to avoid relationships as it would only complicate my plans any more into one night stands. I am not that person anymore.

Christian Europe

Anders Breivik is not exactly a Christian fundamentalist. His agnostic parents did not baptize him, but at the age of fifteen he decided to be baptized in the Norwegian Lutheran Church, although, according to his testimony, he is not a pious man, and religion is not the driving force behind his actions.

He is a European nationalist, and he is persuaded, not unlike a large part of the European citizenry, that European civilization is based on the Christian identity. Consequently, Breivik believes that the main enemy of European civilization has historically been, and remains, Islam.

In his book *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (1937), the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne argues that the end of the Ancient Roman civilization and the beginning of the history of Europe can be dated to the eighth century, when the expansion of Islam began to threaten the Christian community and reached the borders of what Charlemagne called the Holy Roman Empire. Although Pirenne's definition of Europe can be considered historically correct, the creation of the European Union in the second part of the twentieth century has functioned as an

experiment essentially intended to transcend such historical identification with nations and religions in order to conceive of a new political entity as an open process, more in common with the postmodern concept of the network than with the modern concept of the nation.

In 1933, Julien Benda wrote in his book *Discours à la nation européenne*:

> You will make Europe thanks to what you will say, not thanks to what you are. Europe will be a product of your spirit, of your will, not a product of your being, because there is not such a thing as being European.

According to Benda, Europe-*ness* is not based on being or belonging, but rather on spirit. I accept Benda's interpretation, but I would substitute the concept of 'spirit' with that of 'imagination'.

First of all, the European Union has been a political project of peace at the continental level. The war between France and Germany marked the history of European modernity from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the Second World War. It was not only a war between two nation states, but also a cultural war: Enlightenment *versus* Romanticism, universal reason *versus* cultural identity. Overcoming this opposition, which is at the very core of modernity, was the political assignment and the historical mission of the EU. This is the greatness of the European concept, which still appears to be the only political project to be able to interpret the present possibilities of the post-territorial machinery of the internet.

But this project was cast aside and betrayed when the ruling class of the European nations opted for the fast track of financial and monetary unification, and transformed the political and cultural project that Benda describes into something quite different: a post-democratic system based on financial governance. The Maastricht Treaty was the sanction of a monetarist reduction of the European project. Oblivious to Julien Benda's warnings, the European ruling class who gathered in Maastricht decided to found the European process on identity, rather than on political will and imagination. Whereas the European identity of the previous decades was based on economic prosperity and financial stability, the ruling class established the unification process on the Neoliberal dogma of infinite growth, financial balance, consumerism and the absolute power of the European Central Bank. But prosperity was not destined to last forever, and eventually financial absolutism displayed its violent side. At the outset, the European project was essentially a project of 'will, spirit and imagination', only to be subverted during the eighties and nineties into an affirmation of the economic identity of financial capitalism.

What happens now? What is Europe today?

Subjected to the deterritorialized financial abstraction, Europe is now destroying welfare and prosperity and paving the way to fear and to a resurgence of nationalism, ethnicism and war. The ferocious material quantification of the living body of society is laying the basis for a violent reaction, as witnessed in the current trend of nationalism and xenophobia. Anti-German hatred is growing in the Mediterranean countries, nationalist parties are gaining momentum in France, Hungary, Finland, Italy and Greece, as ever greater numbers of people are turning toward racist sentiments, and a wave of depression and despair is sweeping the continent.

In the speeches of Angela Merkel and other European politicians, the European Union implies submission to the ethos of debt, impoverishment, unemployment, fear. It comes as no surprise that Breivik's appalling discourse on the European identity is becoming ever more reflected in the rhetoric of the mainstream.

Islamophobia is the principal means of European aggressive identification, and as Islamophobia spreads, it symmetrically reinforces Islamic fundamentalism. In his *European Declaration of Independence*, Breivik declares, in perfect accord with the spectrum of identitarian forces which are growing in Europe – from Pim Fortuyn's party in the Netherlands to the Italian Northern League; the Hungarian Jobbik (or Movement for a Better Hungary) to the Finns Party (previously known as the True Finns) – that immigration threatens to submerge Europe in an Islamic tidal wave, and that Islam is the ideology of evil. A large part of Breivik's *Declaration* is dedicated to the definition of a common front against the Islam danger. In this common front he wishes to summon both Christians and Jews, who are, in his words, the bravest defenders of the Western identity.

Far from being a pro-Nazi, Breivik writes:

> Whenever someone asks if I am a national socialist, I am deeply offended. If there is one historical figure and past Germanic leader I hate it is Adolf Hitler. If I could travel in a time-machine to Berlin in 1933, I would be the first person to go – with the purpose of killing him.[11]

Although he subscribes to some of the ideas of contemporary neo-Nazis, Breivik abhors Hitler and the German Nazis because they failed to realize an ethnic, cultural and political alliance between Jews and Europeans, who share the same enemy: Islam, and – inevitably – Communism, the absolute evil.

The Phobic Avatar

After trying to make a career selling phone call packages and other similar attempts at business, at the age of twenty-six Breivik decided to retire. He left his apartment and returned to live with his mother. For some years he engaged in the virtual world, becoming entirely absorbed by *World of Warcraft*, a role-playing game.

> World of Warcraft is largely about constructing an avatar. Breivik's avatars were called Andersnordic, Conservatism and Conservative. Andersnordic belonged to the mage class, was male by gender and human by race, one of fifty-two possible types of avatar combination, while Conservative and Conservatism were female avatars he developed later. Conservative was a beautiful, blonde mage. In the compendium Anders was working on in parallel with his gaming, he mentioned that attractive women could help to increase the impact of messages.[12]

In subscribing to the belief that the image of an attractive blonde woman could help in the battleground of ideological propaganda, Breivik shared a modus operandi with advertising men the world over, yet more important to appreciate is the dynamic of role-playing game itself. Such games are not a mere pastime to fill the hours of leisure: the dynamic of the game forces the players to spend enormous amounts of time in front of their screen. If they do not play for long enough, players become a burden for the guild they belong to, risking expulsion from the guild by the leader for being a weak link in the chain.

According to Borchgrevink,

> Anders went on playing World of Warcraft after his most intense period in 2006 and 2007, when he would play for up to sixteen hours a day. At the same time, he was active on a number of other websites and blogs … According to the police he operated around twenty different e-mail addresses and thirty different nicknames on around forty favourite websites and discussion forums, from the website of the tabloid newspaper VG to the neo-Nazi websites such as Stormfront and Nordisk.no.[13]

I do not think that extended exposure of the brain to simulated stimulation like the video games automatically induces a mutation of mental activity. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to imagine that if the conscious experience of a person is primarily developed in the virtual world, then something significant will also happen in this person's psychological and cognitive sphere. In this case, it is worth reiterating that Breivik was diagnosed with a form of alexithymia since he was very young. Alexithymia is an inability to recognize one's own

feelings and emotions, a sort of un-empathy which involves not only the emotional perception of others but also emotional self-perception. The virtualization of lived experience can have a similar effect: firstly, to assuage the pain resulting from rejection, isolation and mockery; and secondly, to exaggerate the inability to relate to others, and to distinguish between fantasy and reality in the social sphere.

In my opinion, extended exposure to the virtual flow is one of the most important causes of the current psycho-cognitive mutation. Yet it would be inaccurate to assert that such exposure is necessarily and in itself a cause of pathology and alienation, because it seems to me that the condition of psychic suffering (namely loneliness, angst, depression) precedes any such circumstantial factors. However, the combined effect of a pre-existing condition of psychic suffering and of an enormous investment of time and mental energy in virtual activity is likely to be, especially for young people, an intensification of the sense of alienation, together with a sort of unravelling of de-socialization, and an increasing misperception of the common space of physical and affective interaction.

In the years that preceded the widespread diffusion of the internet cyberculture, the accepted expectations were for a very different future. Whereas, in the eighties, many commentators imagined the blossoming of an horizontal space of multilateral exchange, of openness and cultural experimentation, of tolerance and creativity, the present reality is proving to be quite different. The proliferation of sources of information, and of the electronic flows of stimulation is so overwhelming that we tend to withdraw into a confined and homogeneous area of the blogosphere, in order to receive the kind of information and opinions which confirm our expectations and restate our convictions.

> The paradox of the informational revolution is that misconceptions survive even if people have access to more information. In Europe and the USA people are seeking out news as never before, not least thanks to the Internet. It might therefore be imagined that poor information would disappear as a result of natural selection, but the belief that Barack Obama is really a Muslim and a foreigner is still alive and kicking among many Americans who should know better. In Norway, the organization Stop Islamiseringen av Norge (SIAN) claims that there will be a Muslim majority in Oslo by 2026 in spite of the statistics produced by Statistisk sentralbyrà and objections from the Human rights service website Rights.no, which SIAN gave as its source. An explanation can be found in a phenomenon called audience fragmentation. People will look at news sources that are on the

same political wavelength as they (whether these are TV sources, newspapers or websites). As a result, parallel news niches develop, parallel media realities.[14]

Contrary to the imagined cybercultural utopia, the internet has been responsible for a resurgence in fanaticism and intolerance. Political and religious niche groups can be regarded as digital tribes that enter the online space with the intention of being confirmed and reassured in their paranoiac fears and phobias. In these online echo chambers, real people are displaced by the phobic ghosts of otherness, and the possibility of tolerant, democratic debate is finally obliterated.

1 Anders Breivik, *2083: A European Declaration of Independence*, available at washingtonpost.com.

2 Anders Breivik, *2083*.

3 Ibid.

4 Breivik, quoting Fjordman, in ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Umberto Eco, 'Ur-Fascism', *New York Review of Books*, 22 June 1995.

7 *A Norwegian Tragedy*, p. 261.

8 Ibid., p. 176.

9 Anders Breivik, *2083*.

10 Quoted in Borchgrevink, *A Norwegian Tragedy*, p. 26.

11 Breivik, *2083*, under the section heading 'The Great Satan, His Cult and the Jews'.

12 Borchgrevink, *A Norwegian Tragedy*, p. 115.

13 Ibid., p. 118.

14 Ibid., p. 124.

Chapter 7

Memory

> Many of these crowds were assembled in the name of death. They were there to attend tributes to the dead. Processions, songs, speeches, dialogues with the dead, recitations of the names of the dead. They were there to see pyres and flaming wheels, thousands of flags dipped in salute, thousands of uniformed mourners. To become a crowd is to keep out death. To break out from crowd is to risk death as an individual, to face dying alone. Crowds come for this reason above all others. They were there to be a crowd.
>
> Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

Early in the morning on Purim day, 25 February 1994, Dr Baruch Goldstein entered the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron, West Bank. Over eight hundred Palestinian Muslims were gathered there to participate in Fajir, the first of the five Islamic prayers. Goldstein was wearing his uniform of the Israel Defense Forces and carried an IMI Galil assault rifle and 140 rounds of ammunition. The guards allowed him to pass, as they thought that he was an officer directed to the adjacent chamber reserved for Jews. Once inside, Goldstein opened fire on the worshippers. He killed twenty-nine, including children, and wounded another 125. Survivors tried to stop him, and he was eventually overcome and beaten to death.

Riots broke out in Palestine soon after the massacre, and in the following week five Israelis lost their lives and twenty-one Palestinians were killed by the Israel Defense Forces.

Yitzhak Rabin, then Israel's prime minister, telephoned Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leader Yasser Arafat, denouncing the attack as a 'loathsome, criminal act of murder'.

Eventually Rabin himself was killed by a radical right-wing orthodox Jew named Yigal Amir, who considered Rabin's policy towards Palestinians and the signing of the Oslo Accords an act of treason.

Many Israeli commentators classified Goldstein as insane, but in the weeks following the massacre, hundreds of Israelis travelled to Goldstein's grave to

celebrate the murderer. Some Hasidim danced and sang around his grave, and many kissed the gravestone, declaring Goldstein a 'hero of Israel'. His epitaph read that Goldstein 'gave his life for the people of Israel, its Torah and land'. However, after the passing of legislation outlawing monuments to terrorists, the Israeli army dismantled it. Nevertheless, the cult of Goldstein persisted among radical Jewish settlers.

One song sung by the settlers included the lyrics, 'Dr Goldstein, there is none other like you in the world. Dr Goldstein, we all love you … You aimed at terrorists' heads, squeezed the trigger hard, and shot bullets, and shot, and shot'.

During the procession that followed the death of Goldstein, Rabbi Yisrael Ariel declared:

> The holy martyr, Baruch Goldstein, is from now on our intercessor in heaven. Goldstein did not act as an individual; he heard the cry of the land of Israel, which is being stolen from us day after day by the Muslims. He acted to relieve that cry of the land!

Toward the end of his eulogy, Rabbi Ariel added: 'The Jews will inherit the land not by any peace agreement but only by shedding blood.'[1]

Identity and Identification

In the 1980s Goldstein had been an activist of the Kach Party, an openly racist, anti-Arab right-wing organization founded in Israel by Rabbi Meir Kahane. Later, as a doctor, Goldstein gained notoriety in Israel because he refused to treat Arabs who needed medical attention. After receiving his assignment as a military doctor, he told his commanders that his religious faith did not allow him to treat wounded or ill Arabs, including those who served in the Israel Defense Forces. His superiors decided not to punish his refusal, but merely to reassign him to South Lebanon.

It would be as unfair to read Goldstein's crime as an expression of the Orthodox Israeli culture. But we have to read madness in its context, and we can read the crime as a symptom of that malady that goes under the name of identity.

Identity is not naturally ascribed; it is a cultural product: it is the effect of the hypostatization (fixation and naturalization) of the cultural difference, of the psychological, social and linguistic particularity. Identity is continuity and confirmation of the place and of the role of a speaker in the cycle of communication. In order to be understood, one must play one's role in the game,

and this role is surreptitiously identified as a mark of belonging.

But identity is continually searching for its roots, and the place from whence the enunciation comes is often mistaken as one of natural origins: primeval and therefore undeniably true. The community, which is a place of communication (a place of exchange of signs conventionally charged of meaning), is mistaken as a natural place of belonging, and transformed into the primeval source of meaning. The temporary and transitional convention that gives meaning to signs is strengthened and transformed into the natural mark or motivated relation between sign and meaning.

Identity may be seen as the hardening of the inner map of orientation. Identity is the opposite of style, which is singularity and consciousness of the singularity, a map of orientation flexible and adaptable, retroactively changing. Style never has a normative feature, nor implies any kind of interdiction and punishment. Identity is a limitation (unconsciously realized) upon the possibility of comprehension and interaction. It is a useful limitation, of course, but it is dangerous to mistake it as a condition of authenticity and primeval belonging. It is the condition of mutual aggressiveness, of racism and violence, and fascism. Identity is based on a hypertrophic sense of the root, and it leads to the reclamation of belonging as criterion of truth and of selection.

Identity is the perceptual and conceptual device that gives us the possibility of knowledge, but sometimes we mistake this knowledge for a re-cognition. So we are led to believe that which we already know, that we possess a map thanks to our belonging. This can be useful sometimes, but it is dangerous to mistake our cultural map for the inner territory of belonging. Without a map, one gets lost, but getting lost is the beginning of the process of knowledge; it is the premise for creating any map.

In their book *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Resolution*, the psychoanalysts Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch write that the repeated application of the same solution in drastically different conditions is a neurotic attitude which leads to pathological situations. Observed within the context of the current global dynamic of deterritorialization–re-territorialization, such neuroticism emerges as a constitutive component of today's world order. On the one hand, globalization and the acceleration of cultural and economic exchanges have increased the need for the flexible adaptation of conceptual and linguistic maps. Yet at the same time, paradoxically, the deterritorialization that globalization entails hugely intensifies the need for an identitarian shelter, the need for the confirmation of belonging. Here lies the identitarian trap which is leading the world towards the proliferation of points of identitarian aggressiveness: the return of concepts such as the homeland, religion and family as aggressive forms of reassurance and self-confirmation.

We can also read this dynamic in terms of techno-mutation and ethno-mutation. On the one hand, information technology has provoked the acceleration and intensification of semiotic exchanges, and on the other hand, the displacement of people and massive waves of economic and political migration have provoked an unprecedented change in the ethnic landscape of the territories, with all the concomitant cultural contamination and intermixing. In conditions of competition, these processes tend to excite the need for identitarian belonging, and to give way to identitarian aggressiveness.

According to *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, universal history can be viewed as a process of deterritorialization. Deterritorialization is the passage from a space whose code is known to a new space, where that code loses its meaning, so that things become unrecognizable for anyone attempting to use the code that was produced by the previous territory. The history of capitalism is continuously producing effects of deterritorialization. At the outset, capitalism destroyed the old relation between the individual and both the agricultural territory and the family. Subsequently, it jeopardized the national borders and created a global space of exchange and communication. Currently, it is jeopardizing the very relation between money and production, and opening the way to a new form of immaterial semiotization. As capitalism destroys all forms of identification, it frees the individuals from the limitations of identity, but simultaneously it provokes a sense of displacement, a sort of opacity that is attributable to the loss of previous meanings and emotional roots. As a result, capitalism ultimately provokes a need for reterritorialization, and a continual return of the past in the shape of national identities, ethnic identities, sexual identities, and so on.

Modern history is a process of forgetting that provokes an effect of anguish and that forces people to desperately hold onto some kind of memory. But memory has faded, together with the dissolution of the past, such that people have to invent a new set of memories. Like the character Rachel in the 1982 neo-noir sci-fi film *Blade Runner*, people create their own memories, putting together pieces of old texts, of faded images, of words whose meaning is lost.

'Memory is right', said Chaim Weizmann, when summoned to the Congress of Versailles by the victors of the Second World War, in reference to the right of Jewish people to reclaim the land of their ancestors.[2] Weizmann's assertion, which was fundamental for the creation of the state of Israel, today sounds like an arrogant provocation. Memory is not right, but it is part of an identity, and identity is not based on memory; rather, identity creates memory.

Milan Kundera writes the following about the future and the past:

> People are always shouting they want to create a better future. It's not true.

> The future is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past. They are fighting for access to the laboratories where photographs are retouched and biographies and histories rewritten.[3]

Contrary to common belief, the past is far from unchangeable. The past only exists in our minds, and therefore it takes new shapes as we distance ourselves from it, and as we displace the viewpoint from which we are remembering.

'Memory is right' was not only a provocation, it was a declaration of war, as different memories conflict. The creation of Israel is based on Weizmann's contention that memory is right, and the never-ending war between Israel and Palestinians is based on the arbitrary identification of memory and right.

Traps of Identification

The painful experience of eradication and diaspora enabled Jewish culture to play a decisive role in the creation of enlightened universalism. The very notion of universal reason is inseparable from the experience of modern Jews, who, as a result of their diasporic existence, began to think and to legislate in universal terms, in terms that did not depend on identity, location and memory. Jewish culture was also essential to the creation both of the bourgeois culture of universal Humanism, and to the proletarian culture of internationalism. But at the same time, the periodic pogroms and the massive persecutions to which they were subjected – from Spain to Russia, from North Africa to Poland, until the Nazi project of final extermination – also forced Jews to seek community protection and repeatedly to attempt to relocate to their primeval territory.

In the year 1492, modernity began under the seal of unspeakable violence, systematic destruction, submission and humiliation. Not only in the New World, colonized by the Spanish *conquistadores*, but also in Spain itself, where the war of the Reconquista ended in the mass-expulsion of the Jews from the re-christianized territories.

A great number of Jews and Muslims were obliged to convert, but even upon becoming *conversos* and *marranos* they were not left in peace. On the contrary, conversion put in motion the hellish machine of the Spanish Inquisition, whose primary concern soon became to establish the authenticity of the conversion of Jews and Muslims, many of whom were accused of performing in secret the rituals of their old religion. For many of them, dissimulation became the rule of life, and double language a necessity for survival. Dissimulation became the

solution to their problem of identity, as the obligation to hide one's supposed nature reinforced the need for nostalgic, resentful and ultimately aggressive belonging. This painful cycle of dissimulation and identitarianism is by no means exclusive to the experience of the early modern Jews, but rather, is common to a large number of other human groups throughout modernity. Indeed, it is the noose that tightens around modernity's neck: the deterritorialization produced by progress forces people to enact strategies of dissimulation of their imaginary origins in order to make room for new, aggressive forms of re-territorialization.

Obliged to dissimulate their rituals and beliefs, Spanish Jews gradually lost the memory of their cultural references, then, when they could flee to more tolerant regions and cities (such as Amsterdam) they resumed their search for their religious identity. But much of their memory had been lost in the decades of persecution and dissimulation, and often, the interdiction of the persecutors appeared to be the only evidence of its previous existence. Paradoxically, what the persecutors had forbidden, increasingly came to be perceived as the 'true' identity which had been lost, and consequently, enacting exactly that which had been forbidden appeared to be the safest way to retrace and reappropriate the original identity, to rebuild the collective memory. This is the essence of the trap of identity: only the gaze of the other acts as a mirror, as the source of self-identification. The obsession of primitive identity is an impasse, because the truth about one's being is possessed by one's enemy, and only the transgression of the oppressor's interdiction leads to the core of one's belonging. People's memory is largely rooted in this trap, in this double bind. African Americans and Armenians, Tibetans and Tamils – all these populations have been denied the living relation with their tradition, only to find it in the eyes of their oppressors.

The working class did have a chance to escape this trap, which links modernity and tradition in a double bind. It is not by chance that Jews have been integral to the formation of the worker's consciousness in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, just as it is not by chance that the resurgence of Jewish identitarianism follows the defeat of the workers' revolution. The worker class has no roots and no identity. Shifting from the condition of farmer to the condition of industrial worker means forgetting about identitarian roots. This is the condition of the universal principle of emancipation that is called internationalism.

Internationalism is not abstract moral solidarity, mere political will. It is the effect of the condition of work without quality, the condition of abstract work. As a consequence of this condition of radical alienation, industrial workers have been able to create the cultural conditions of equality. Industrial workers know that they are equals in their loss of humanity, of life, of time, of difference. It is through this alienation that difference can be reconstructed as consciousness, not as memory, as a political process of solidarity, not as belonging to an imagined

origin.

Since the working class was defeated by precariousness and the globalization of the labour market, the *Volk* has returned, stupid and bloody as it is, bringing with it the curse of origins, the obsession with belonging. In his book *La Défaite de la pensée*, Alain Finkielkraut rightly laments the fading of universal reason as the foundation of law and social structure, and the the re-emergence of identitarian culture and belonging. When relativism becomes culturalism, when belonging is mistaken as the foundation of law ('memory is right'), when workers' internationalism is defeated, modern universalism dies, and Humanism dies with it. Only the global, idiotic proliferation of particularities remains: crime and suicide.

The Ultimate Suicide

In his booklet, *Apocalyptic Politics: On the Rationality of Iranian Policy*, the Iranian scholar Mehdi Khalaji speaks of a frightening possibility: the foreign policy of the Iranian regime, and particularly its relationship with Israel, may be guided by an apocalyptic vision based on the belief in the return of the Hidden Imam, al-Mahdī.

Twelver Shia – such as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the former president of the Islamic Republic of Iran – believe that the tenth century Imam al-Mahdī did not die, but was hidden by God (this is referred to as the Occultation of 941 AD), and will emerge in order to fulfil his mission of bringing peace and justice to the world. According to Twelver Shias, Imam al-Mahdī will reappear when the world falls into chaos and civil war spreads everywhere. At that time, half of the true believers will ride from Yemen carrying white flags to Makkah, while the other half will ride from Karbala, in Iraq, carrying black flags to Makkah. Then, in accordance with Allah's command, Imam al-Mahdī and his followers will bring justice and peace to the world by establishing Islam to all peoples.

The return of the Hidden Imam is not merely the belief of a Shia sect, but is deeply rooted in the eschatology of Islam. Henry Corbin discusses this in his *History of Islamic Philosophy*, in which he links apocalyptic expectations and the inner symbolism of the religious philosophy of Islam.

> The word *ta'wil* and the word *tanzil* constitute a pair of terms and concepts which are complementary and contrasting. Properly speaking, *tanzil* designates positive religion, the letter of the Revelation dictated by the Angel to the Prophet. It means to cause this Revelation to descend from the higher world. Conversely, *ta'wil* means to cause to return, to lead back to

the origin, and thus to return to the true and original meaning of a written text. It is to cause something to arrive at its origin … In Ismaili gnosis, fulfilment of the *ta'wil* is inseparable from a spiritual rebirth (*wiladah ruhaniyah*).

The concept of the hidden Imam has led the masters of the *Shaykhi* school into a deeper appreciation of the meaning and mode of this invisible presence. Here again an essential part is played by the mundus imaginalis (*'alam al-mithal*). To see the Imam on the celestial Earth of *Hurqalya* (cf. the Earth of Light, *Terra lucida*, in Manichaeism), is to see him where he truly is, in a world which is simultaneously concrete and supra-sensible, and to see him with the organ appropriate to the perception of such a world. A figure like that of the twelfth Imam does not appear and disappear according to the laws of material historicity. The decision of the Imam as to whether or not he can appear to men is dependent on the men in question. His appearance is the very meaning of their renewal, and in this lies, ultimately, the deepest significance of the Shiite idea of the occultation and the appearance. Men have concealed the Imam from themselves behind a veil, have made themselves incapable of seeing him, because they have lost or paralysed the organs of 'theophanic perception', of that 'knowledge through the heart' which is defined in the gnoseology of the Imams. It is meaningless, therefore, to speak of the Manifestation of the hidden Imam as long as men are incapable of recognizing him. The *parousia* is not an event which may suddenly erupt one fine day; it is something that happens day after day in the consciousness of the Shiite faithful … The *ta'wil* will triumph, enabling the human race to discover its unity, just as, throughout the time of the *ghaybah*, the secret of the only true ecumenism will have been contained in esotericism. This is why the great Sufi *shaykh* and Iranian Shiite already mentioned, Sa'd al-Din Hamuyah (seventh/thirteenth century), declared, 'The hidden Imam will not appear before the time when people are able to understand, even from the very thongs of his sandals, the secrets of the *tawhid*' – that is to say, the esoteric meaning of the divine Unity.[4]

The re-apparition of the Hidden Imam, therefore, will be brought about by the elevation of the human soul, and this will become possible only thanks to purification and self-sacrifice.

What are the historical conditions of this purification and sacrifice? This question – whose implications are not only religious – is clearly and understandably haunting the Israeli secret service. A radical interpretation of the doctrine may imply the self-sacrifice of the Shia population itself, as a condition

for the salvation of humankind. The doctrine of the Hidden Imam may therefore be interpreted as the theoretical condition of the ultimate suicide. Which purification could be better than a game of mutually assured destruction between two unofficial nuclear powers such as Israel and Iran?

Once upon a time, in the years of the Cold War, Russian and American military analysts elaborated the doctrine of M.A.D. (Mutual Assured Destruction) as a form of paradoxical reassurance: neither nuclear power would use the bomb, because each side knew that their aggression would immediately lead to retaliatory annihilation.

Looking back, those times appear reassuring in comparison to the present day. After all, those Communists were reasonable people, not suicidal mystics or identitarian fanatics. Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was primarily responsible for America arming the Taliban against the Soviet Union, was wrong when he retrospectively justified his decision by asking rhetorically: 'What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet Empire? Some stirred-up Muslims or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?'[5]

As we now know, the end of the Cold War did not usher in an age of harmony and tolerance only occasionally troubled by the actions of marginal fanatics. Instead, it led to a chaotic age of systematic identitarian aggressiveness and suicidal madness. Suicide was not part of the Soviet ideology. It is very much present in the ideology of fundamentalist Islam.

The infinite war that George Bush launched in the aftermath of the terrorist suicide of 9/11 turned into a catastrophic defeat because its enemy was not a monolithic power determined to survive and win, but a proliferating army of *Shaheed*. Martyrdom and suicide are the most dangerous and unpredictable weapons of those 'stirred-up Muslims' that Brzezinski so crassly underestimated in 1998.

> Think not of those who are slain in Allah's way as dead. Nay, they live, finding their sustenance in the presence of their Lord;
>
> They rejoice in the bounty provided by Allah: And with regard to those left behind, who have not yet joined them [in their bliss], the [Martyrs] glory in the fact that on them is no fear, nor have they [cause to] grieve.[6]

George Bush proved unable to understand that a mix of humiliation, suffering and religious fanaticism could unleash a wave of suicidal violence. This wave is continuiing after a decade of war, and seems to be very resilient.

Samir Kassir, the Lebanese writer who was killed by terrorists in 2005, wrote about unhappiness as a fundamental motivation of Arab culture and political

action in *Considerations sur le malheur arabe* (*Being Arab*). Beginning from the Arab Golden Age, and through his exploration of the impact of modern culture in the first part of the twentieth century, Kassir identifies Arab political aggressiveness as an effect of colonial victimization and the ensuing culture of victimhood. The Tunisian psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama also throws light on the relationship between despair and regressive political desire: 'Despair is not a category of political science, but the Islamist movement, particularly in its extremist version, cannot be understood if we do not understand it as the most powerful testimony of mass despair'.[7]

Since despair is not commonly recognized by conventional political science, it proves an unsatisfactory tool of analysis for the contemporary political culture of Islam (not to mention other phenomena), and Western political thought, underpinned by a deficient political science, is unable to find a solution to Islamist aggression. The current distinction between 'good, moderate Islam' and 'bad, radical Islam' is a symptom of this misunderstanding, and of this ineffective conception of Islamist despair by Western political pragmatism.

And yet, one may observe that, despite the fact that many sub-Saharan African and Asian countries have been oppressed and impoverished by Western colonialism, the people of these continents have not reacted in the same way, and have not produced a comparably regressive cult of the origins. In the context of Monotheism, the cult of the origins compared with present misery is based on the premise that earthly history is the history of a Fall, of a decline. This regressive vision of historical time explains something of the contemporary Islamic political culture:

> What is the meaning of the political desire of the origins, and the Terror that goes with it? What is the turning back towards primeval scenes, and the deadly fight engaging in their name? How can we interpret the desire of exile from the present, the reduction of future to a past which only allows the repetition of the identical, so that the present is only the shadow of what has happened already?[8]

The suicidal strategy of radical Islamism is a result both of the cult of the origins and of the persistent humiliation that America's self-defeating strategy of infinite war has inflicted on the Arab people.

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1 Norton Mezvinsky and Israel Shahak, *Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel*, p. 10.

2 Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919*, p. 412

3 *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, p. 22.

4 *Henry Corbin, History of Islamic Philosophy*, pp. 12, 70–71.

5 Zbigniew Brezezinski, interview, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 15 Jan. 1998

6 Qur'an, Sura 3.

7 *La psychanalyse à l'epreuve de l'Islam*, p. 97.

8 Ibid., p. 30.

Chapter 8

You People Will Never Be Safe

Semiocapitalism is based on the exploitation of neural energy. Attention is under siege, both in the space of production and in that of consumption. Attention implies a constant investment of nervous energy, and this is much more difficult to manage and is much more unpredictable than the muscular effort required of workers on the assembly line.

During the years of the Prozac economy, cognitive workers were motivated to invest their creativity in the process of production, in expectation of the success and profit that would be their reward – they were persuaded that work and capital could be forged together in the same process of mutual enrichment. Workers were encouraged to think of themselves as free agents, and that phenomena such as the dotcom bubble were based on real expansions of revenue, generating high career expectations.

But the alliance of semiocapital and cognitive work was not to last forever.

Neuro-Exploitation and Collapse

In the last year of the dotcom decade, when the techno-apocalypse was announced in the guise of the Millennium Bug, dark clouds were looming in the clear skies of the self-appointed 'new economy'. The social imagination was so charged with apocalyptic expectation that the myth of the global techno-crash sent a thrilling wave of anticipation around the world. Although the announced apocalypse went by the name of the 'Millennium Bug', when the clocks turned twelve on the night of the millennium itself, the absence of any cataclysmic event left the global psyche teetering on the brink of an abyss of the collective imagination. A few months later, in spring of the year 2000, the dotcom crash ushered in the slow-motion collapse – a collapse that, in one way or another, has never been really overcome – despite Bush's infinite war, despite the proclaimed recovery.

The recombinant alliance of cognitive work and financial capital was over.

The young army of free agents, self-exploiters and virtual prosumers was transformed into modernity's horde of precarious cognitive workers: cognitarians, cognitive proletarians and internet-slaves who invest nervous energy in exchange for a precarious revenue.

Precarity is the general condition of semio-workers. The essential feature of precarity in the social sphere is not the loss of regularity in the labour relation, since labour has always been more or less precarious, notwithstanding legal regulations. The essential transformation induced by the digitalization of the labour process is the fragmentation of the personal continuity of work, the fractalization and cellularization of time. The worker disappears as a person, and is replaced by abstract fragments of time. The cyberspace of global production can be viewed as an immense expanse of depersonalized human time.

In the sphere of industrial production, abstract labour time was embodied in a worker of flesh and bone, with a certified and political identity. When the boss was in need of human time for capital valorization, he was obliged to hire a human being, and was obliged to deal with the physical weaknesses, maladies and rights of this human being; was obliged to face trade unions reclaims and the political demands of which the human was a bearer.

As we move into the age of info-labour, there is no longer a need to invest in the availability of a person for eight hours a day throughout the duration of his or her life. Capital no longer recruits people, but buys packets of time, separated from their interchangeable and occasional bearers. In the internet economy, flexibility has evolved into a form of fractalization of work.

Fractalization is the modular and recombinant fragmentation of the period of activity. The worker no longer exists as a person. He or she is only an interchangeable producer of micro-fragments of recombinant semiosis that enter into the continuous flux of the internet.

Capital no longer pays for the availability of a worker to be exploited for a long period of time; it no longer pays a salary that covers the entire range of economic needs of a person who works.

The worker (a machine endowed with a brain that can be used for fragments of time) is paid for his or her occasional, temporary services. Work time is fragmented and cellularized. Cells of time are put up for sale online, and businesses can purchase as many of them as they want without being obligated in any way to provide any social protection to the worker. Depersonalized time has become the real agent of the process of valorization, and depersonalized time has no rights, no union organization and no political consciousness. It can only be either available or unavailable – although this latter alternative remains purely theoretical inasmuch as the physical body still has to buy food and pay

rent, despite not being a legally recognized person.

The time necessary to produce the info-commodity is liquefied by the recombinant digital machine. The human machine is there, pulsating and available, like a brain-sprawl in waiting. The extension of time is meticulously cellularized: cells of productive time can be mobilized in punctual, casual and fragmentary forms. The recombination of these fragments is automatically realized in the network. The mobile phone is the tool that makes possible the connection between the needs of semiocapital and the mobilization of the living labour of cyberspace. The ringtone of the mobile phone summons workers to reconnect their abstract time to the reticular flux.

In this new labour dimension, people have no right to protect or negotiate the time of which they are formally the proprietors, but are effectively expropriated. That time does not really belong to them, because it is separated from the social existence of the people who make it available to the recombinant cyber-productive circuit. The time of work is fractalized, reduced to minimal fragments that can be reassembled, and the fractalization makes it possible for capital to constantly find the conditions of the minimal salary. Fractalized work can punctually rebel, here and there, at certain points – but this does not set into motion any concerted endeavour of resistance.

Only the spatial proximity of the bodies of labourers and the continuity of the experience of working together lead to the possibility of a continuous process of solidarity. Without this proximity and this continuity, the conditions for the cellularized bodies to coalesce into community do not pertain. Individual behaviours can only come together to form a substantive collective momentum when there is a continuous proximity in time, a proximity that info-labour no longer makes possible.

Cognitive activity has always been involved in every kind of human production, even that of a more mechanical type. There is no process of human labour that does not involve an exercise of intelligence. But today, cognitive capacity is becoming the essential productive resource. In the age of industrial labour, the mind was put to work as a repetitive automatism, the neurological director of muscular effort. While industrial work was essentially repetition of physical acts, mental work is continuously changing its object and its procedures. Thus, the subsumption of the mind in the process of capitalist valorization leads to a true mutation. The conscious and sensitive organism is subjected to a growing competitive pressure, to an acceleration of stimuli, to a constant exertion of his/her attention. As a consequence, the mental environment, the info-sphere in which the mind is formed and enters into relations with other minds, becomes a psychopathogenic environment.

To understand semiocapital's infinite game of mirrors, we must first outline a

new disciplinary field, delimited by three aspects: the critique of political economy of connective intelligence; the semiology of linguistic-economic fluxes; and the psychochemistry of the info-sphere, focused on the study of the psychopathological effects of the mental exploitation caused by the acceleration of the info-sphere.

In the connected world, the retroactive loops of general systems theory are fused with the dynamic logic of biogenetics to form a post-human vision of digital production. Human minds and flesh are integrated with digital circuits thanks to interfaces of acceleration and simplification: a model of bio-info production is emerging that produces semiotic artefacts with the capacity for the auto-replication of living systems. Once fully operative, the digital nervous system can be rapidly installed in every form of organization.

The digital network is provoking an intensification of the info-stimuli, and these are transmitted from the social brain to individual brains. This acceleration is a pathogenic factor that has wide-ranging effects in society.

Since capitalism is wired into the social brain, a psychotic meme of acceleration acts as pathological agent: the organism is drawn into a spasm until collapse.

The Enslavement of the Future

Debt is the burden acting as a ball and chain for the future enslavement of the millennial generation.

Anya Kamenetz is a young journalist who has investigated the growing phenomenon of students running up debt in order to finance their university studies. Her book *Generation Debt*, published in 2006, is a denunciation of this growing plague, which is casting a shadow on the future of a majority of students in the United States, the United Kingdom, and countries around the world in which the privatization of the university system is proceeding apace.

> We are restless as well as strapped. The common thread joining all members of this generation is a sense of permanent impermanence. It's hard to commit to a family, a community, a job, or a life path when you don't know if you'll be able to make a living, make a marriage last, or live free of debt. It's hard to invest in ourselves when our nation isn't interested in investing in us. It's hard to be hopeful in a time of global warming and global war.[1]

She also writes:

> The student loan system currently does a great job of delivering billions in profits to lenders while amply protecting them from risk through generous federal subsidies and guarantees. For borrowers, the picture is not so rosy. There are no disinterested actors to guide borrowers through the system. Students with no credit history and no experience making financial decisions for themselves are apt to leave the borrowing decisions to their parents, who in turn place trust in the hands of the college financial aid office, which may not be fully disclosing its relationship with the commercial institutions that actually become the creditors. By the time graduation rolls around, the student, who has managed not to think about her loans for the past four or five or six years, usually doesn't even know how much money she owes, or to whom. Surveys show that college students ebulliently overestimate their future incomes and underestimate their loan payments. The higher the loan amounts, the further off the students' estimates tend to be.[2]

In an article dedicated to the same subject, the sociologist Andrew Ross writes

> Unlike almost every other kind of debt, student loans are nondischargeable through bankruptcy, and collection agencies are granted extraordinary powers to extract payments, including the right to garnish wages, tax returns, and Social Security. The market in securitized loans known as SLABS (Student Loans Asset-Backed Securities) accounts for more than a quarter of the aggregate $1 trillion student debt. As with the subprime racket, SLABS are often bundled with other kinds of loans and traded on secondary markets. With all the power on the side of creditors and investors, it is no surprise that student lending is among the most lucrative sectors of the financial industry. As for federal loans, they are offered at unjustifiably high interest rates – far above those at which the government borrows money.[3]

As Maurizio Lazzarato explains in his book *La fabrique de l'homme endetté*, debt is a new form of social blackmail, the chain obliging people to accept any kind of employment, however precarious, ill-rewarded, harmful or humiliating.

Binding young people with the chain of debt is a way to oblige them to accept exploitation, and to destroy in advance their ability to organize and revolt against capital violence. In 2011, the Occupy movement launched a campaign to denounce the plague of student loans, but the movement was unable to support a long-lasting action of organized insolvency and sabotage of the debt. This is indeed a worrying sign, since if social movements are unable to dispel the sense

of guilt that debt produces, if precarious workers are unable to find the means of cultural and political autonomy, the suicidal wave that has been growing during the first decade of the twenty-first century will swell to form a tide.

Suicide is already the first cause of death among young people, and this cannot be explained in terms of morality, family values or similar hypocritical rhetoric. To understand the contemporary form of this ethical shipwreck, we need to reflect on the transformations of activity and labour, the subsumption of mental time to the competitive realm of productivity; we must understand the psycho-mutation, and the effects of financial nihilism on the sensibility of young people.

Brzezinski Was Wrong

Suicide is clearly not a new phenomenon, but in the first two decades of the twenty-first century it has taken an exceptionally significant space in contemporary social behaviour. Somehow, suicide has come to be perceived increasingly as the only effective action of the oppressed, the only action which can actually dispel anxiety, depression and impotence.

Contemporary suicide has little to do with the phenomenon studied by Emile Durkheim on the eve of the twentieth century, and very little to do with romantic suicide in the nineteenth.

Durkheim spoke of anomic suicide, referring to the moral confusion caused by the perception of being unable to fit in within the social frame. In the contemporary precarious society, anomie is a totally normalized condition. In the age of globalization, suicide has acquired a new mass dimension, especially among young people: according to the World Health Organization, suicide is today the second cause of death among young people, after car accidents, which is often a disguised form of suicide. Furthermore, suicide has acquired an aggressive meaning, often linked with terrorist actions.

The twenty-first century was inaugurated by a monumental act of suicide. The mass murder committed by nineteen young Arab men on the morning of 11 September 2001 was obviously a terrorist act, but also, and perhaps firstly, an act of self-annihilation. No matter how much they were indoctrinated and disciplined, during the night that preceded the most incredible terrorist act of all time, those nineteen young men had been thinking about their own life and death, not only about their glorious mission.

Commenting on the action, in *Le Monde*, Baudrillard wrote:

> Moral condemnation and the sacred union against terrorism are equal to

> the prodigious jubilation engendered by witnessing this global superpower being destroyed; better, by seeing it more or less self-destroying, even suiciding spectacularly. Though it is [this superpower] that has, through its unbearable power, engendered all that violence brewing around the world, and therefore this terrorist imagination which – unknowingly – inhabits us all.[4]

This is the point: the massive suicide of 9/11 has acted as contagion, and first of all it has drawn the United States, the most powerful country of all time, to a specular action, symmetrically answering suicide with another form of suicide. The Bush–Cheney–Rumsfeld reaction in the days and years that followed the World Trade Center mass murder, appears to us now, just over a decade later, as crazily suicidal as the action of Mohamed Atta and his accomplices.

It is now crystal clear that the inconceivable happened: the United States and the West lost the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden's death is irrelevant from a strategic point of view. During the Islamist upheaval following the release of the infamous movie *Innocence of Muslims*, thousands of young Arabs shouted, 'We are all Osama.'

Bin Laden's project of restoration of the Caliphate, possibly the most reactionary project ever conceived, is today strangely taking shape, as a monstrous development of a monstrous concept: the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant under the leadership of Abu Baqr al-Baghdadi is transforming the delirious promise of Bin Laden into a political and military reality. The infinite war that Bush launched in the aftermath of 9/11 has mutated into an ongoing thorn in the side of the American military in particular, and for Western politics as a whole.

From Indonesia to Morocco – although in different forms – the project of imposing Sharia law is gathering force, and the so-called Arab Spring has paradoxically collapsed from democracy to Islamism.

Zbigniew Brzezinski's 1998 remarks concerning America's arming of a 'stirred-up' Taliban in the 1970s, as quoted in the previous chapter of this book, were only accurate in the short term. Sponsoring a small terrorist group in a mountainous and inaccessible part of the world is a small price to pay for the enormous gain for the West and the American conception of democracy: the destruction of the Soviet Empire, the enemy par excellence.

In the short term, from the point of view of the symmetrical order of the twentieth-century world, defeating the Soviet Union was vastly more important than the consequences of strengthening a small group of anti-modern anti-democratic fundamentalist fanatics.

But history judges harshly the short-term view, and the twenty-first century is

unfolding in an entirely foreign landscape to that imagined by the architects of the Cold War. With the hindsight of modernity, we might now conclude that, in fact, Brzezinski was wrong. The Soviet Union was a pachyderm destined for slow decay and dissolution. The Afghanistan war certainly played a decisive role in provoking the collapse of the Soviet Empire, but that Empire was doomed to dissolution in any case.

In a letter sent by Yuri Andropov to Leonid Brezhnev in 1977, the old KGB secretary identified the lack of progress in the development of computer science as a deadly threat to the survival of the USSR in the face of competition from the West. He was right. Forget about Afghanistan. The Soviet Union could not survive the in the age of the internet.

If we examine the effects of the recent spread of religious fanaticism and anti-Western hatred among the growing Muslim population (the only community in the world that does not know any decline in birth rate) and the increasing unemployment of the younger generation of Muslim countries, Brzezinski's remarks appear to be very short-sighted indeed.

Random Killers

Speaking about the deadly effects of drone attacks, in May 2013 Barack Obama acknowledged that four American citizens had been killed in drone strikes, but defended the legitimacy of such strikes in bold terms:

> America does not take strikes to punish individuals, we act against terrorists who pose a continuing and imminent threat to the American people and when there are no other governments capable of effectively addressing the threat. And before any strike is taken, there must be near-certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured – the highest standard we can set.

In speaking of near-certainty, Obama was implicitly acknowledging the impossibility of avoiding accidental civilian casualties when conducting remote drone strikes in inaccessible regions of foreign lands.

Drone strikes began in 2004 under George W. Bush and have increased substantially under Barack Obama's presidency. Some media refer to the hundreds of American drone attacks in countries like Pakistan and Yemen as a 'drone war'. Estimates of those killed by drones between 2004 and early 2013 range from around 2,000 to around 3,000; estimates of the proportion of civilian deaths vary dramatically. Certainly (not near-certainly), the number of children and women killed is significant.

According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, the number of civilian casualties is between 400 and 800 civilians, over 100 of whom are children. The Bureau also revealed that, since President Obama took office, at least fifty civilians have been killed in follow-up strikes when they had gone to help victims hit in the initial attack, and more than twenty civilians have also been attacked in deliberate strikes on funerals and mourners.

Woolwich is a district in southeast London where, on Wednesday, 22 May 2013, a young man attacked a British soldier with knives and a cleaver. After killing the soldier, the aggressor tried to behead the victim. A crowd gathered, shouting. The murderer did not attempt to flee, and asked a woman to take pictures of him and the victim. In the footage obtained by ITV News, he was filmed wielding a bloodied meat cleaver and making political statements.

'You think politicians are going to die?' he said. 'No, it's going to be the average guy – like you – and your children. So get rid of them. Tell them to bring our troops back so you can all live in peace.' Then he added: 'I apologize that women have had to witness this today, but in our land our women have to see the same. You people will never be safe. Remove your government, they don't care about you.'

The name of the killer is Michael Adebolajo, an ordinary British student of Nigerian origin. Born in Lambeth in December 1984, he grew up in Romford, travelled to school on the bus, played football and appeared to have many friends. His family are practising Christians and attend the local church. These are the long-lasting effects of the infinite war. Young people grow up hating the enemy. But who is the enemy? It is another young man, who is walking in the street, wearing a T-shirt bearing patriotic words. Random killers are walking on the streets of an average suburb on an average day. Average people are waiting for the bus. You people will never be safe.

Suicide by Cop

The Navy Yard is almost as old as the United States. It was bought in 1799, and for a century it was the nation's largest shipbuilding port. The yard eventually lost its prominence as a shipyard, at which point it was converted into a centre for the design and maintenance of the US Navy's fleet and weapons.

On Monday, 16 September 2013 it became a scene of murder and chaos.

'We still don't know all the facts. But we do know that several people have been shot and some have been killed', President Obama said on Monday afternoon. 'So we are confronting yet another mass shooting. And today it

happened on a military installation in our nation's capital.' Obama called the shooting a 'cowardly act' that targeted military and civilians serving their country.

'They know the dangers of serving abroad,' he said, 'but today they faced the unimaginable violence that we wouldn't have expected here at home.'

After a few hours of confusion (some policemen at the scene said that two or three men were shooting at random in the Navy Yard) the rampage ended when Aaron Alexis, a thirty-four-year-old veteran, was killed and identified as the murderer.

Alexis received two routine medals for his service in the Navy: the National Defense Service Medal and the Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, which are given to any member of the armed forces serving during a national emergency.

Alexis's father told police that his son had angermanagement problems associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, and that he had been an active participant in rescue attempts during the World Trade Centre attack on 9/11. Alexis's LinkedIn profile details his attendance at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University and his work as a network technician at SinglePoint Technologies. According to his friends, he was an easygoing guy who practised Buddhism, but that he complained about a lack of jobs and money, and liked to carry a pistol in his belt.

Alexis appeared to be suffering from mental illness. A few weeks before he went to the Navy Yard in Washington, D.C., and opened fire on workers there, he went to the police in order to complain of the persecution that he considered himself to be victim to. He told police that he heard voices that he feared were 'sending vibrations through his body' and were out to harm him. The officers who received the Alexis's complaints wrote in their report that he 'stated that the individuals are using "some sort of microwave machine" to send vibrations through the ceiling, penetrating his body so he cannot fall asleep'.[5]

In 2004, Alexis was involved in an incident in which he shot the rear tyres of a vehicle owned by a construction worker doing work in his neighbourhood. On that occasion, Alexis told police that he had an anger-fuelled 'blackout', but added that he felt he had been 'mocked' and 'disrespected' by the workers. Nevertheless, the young man was allowed to retain lethal weapons.

According to Matt Kennard's article, 'How the "War on Terror" Came Home', published by the *Guardian* last year, the story of this young man is not to be seen as an isolated incident, but as one of the many effects of the War on Terror launched by the Bush Administration in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Matt Kennard writes:

> The PTSD epidemic is just one of many problems faced by the US military as it deals with the fallout from over a decade of war and occupation. Another dimension of its difficulties is that during the 'war on terror', the US military relaxed its entry criteria in order to cope with a mid-decade recruitment crisis. As a direct consequence, over 100,000 Americans with criminal convictions – including serious felony offenses from rape and murder, to assault – benefitted from the 'moral waiver' program, which allowed the military to look the other way when recruiting soldiers with shady pasts.[6]

Also:

> Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is estimated to afflict upwards of 30 per cent of veterans, and while resources have been added, treatment for psychological ailments is sorely lacking. The greatest threat by far posed by traumatized veterans is not to others, but to themselves: it is estimated that 22 veterans in the US are committing suicide every day.[7]

Some of them commit suicide by cop.

What is suicide by cop? The fact is that it is not easy to kill yourself. Alone, in your room, pulling the trigger, is a sad affair. More attractive for a certain mindset is to kill people at random, so that sooner or later the police will come and do the job for you.

Reading about the Navy Yard's rampage, about the Alexis story – his mental suffering, his paranoid crises, his violent acting out and the following predictable conclusion – one comes to this chilling realization that often (although clearly not always) mass murder is conducted in the service of a kind of suicide by proxy.

1 Anya Kamenetz, *Generation Debt*, p. 13.

2 Ibid., p. 31.

3 Andrew Ross, 'NYU Professor: Are Student Loans Immoral?', *Daily Beast*, 27 September 2012.

4 Jean Baudrillard, 'The Spirit of Terrorism', *Le Monde*, 2 November 2001.

5 'Rampage at the Navy Yard: What Happened inside Building 197?', *Washington Post*, 20 September 2013.

6 Matt Kennard, 'How the "War on Terror" Came Home', *Guardian*, 17 September 2013.

7 Ibid.

Chapter 9

Suicidal Wave

The ambulances collected suicides whose hands were full of rings.
Federico Garcia Lorca

Japan 1977

Nineteen seventy-seven is the year of mass youth suicide in Japan: the official figure is 784 young people.

At the end of the summer holidays of that year, thirteen primary school children killed themselves in quick succession. The gratuitousness and the incomprehensibility of the gesture was particularly disconcerting and caused a general outcry in the country: in all these cases, there was no apparent motivation or reason for the act. There was a striking lack of words, an inability on the part of the adults that care for the children to predict, understand or explain what had just happened.

In 1983, a group of high school students murdered several homeless old people in a park in Yokohama. When interrogated, the children offered no explanation other than that the homeless people they killed were *obutsu*, dirty and impure things. As in manga comics, which achieved mass readership precisely in the second half of the seventies, the enemy is not evil, it is dirty. Cleanliness, ridding the world of 'waste products', of what is indefinite, confused, hairy and dusty, prepares the way for the perfectly smooth, digital surfaces. Erotic seduction is progressively disconnected from sexual contact until it becomes sheer aesthetic stimulation. It is in Japan that the first symptoms of this trend can be spotted. The year is 1977.

For many reasons, 1977 can be seen as the year of passage beyond modernity. But while in Europe, this passage is signalled by the philosophy of authors such as Baudrillard, Virilio, Guattari, Deleuze, and by the political consciousness of mass movements such as the creative Italian *autonomia* or the punk movement in London, and while in North America it takes the form of a cultural explosion, of

a movement of urban transformations which is expressed in the artistic and musical 'no wave', in Japan the passage already appears without mediation, as an inexplicable monstrosity which quickly becomes daily normality, the prevalent form of collective existence.

In that year the world (the real, material, physical world) began to be perceived as what the science fiction author Philip K. Dick terms 'kipple':

> Kipple, useless objects, like junk mail or match folders after you use the last match or gum wrappers … When nobody's around, kipple reproduces itself. For instance, if you go to bed leaving any kipple around your apartment, when you wake up there is twice as much of it. It always gets more and more. No one can win against kipple, except temporarily and maybe in one spot.[1]

Nineteen seventy-seven is a double-faced year. It is the year of the last communist proletarian revolts of the century against capitalist rule and against the bourgeois state, but it is also the year when Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs created the Apple trademark and the tools for spreading information technology. In 1977 Alain Minc and Simon Nora wrote *L'informatisation de la societé*, a text which theorizes the coming dissolution of nation states as a result of the political effects of emerging telematics. In the same year, Jean François Lyotard wrote the book *La condition postmoderne* and Charlie Chaplin died, and with him, the last traces of human kindness seemed to disappear too.

In the cultural production of that year I see the premonition of a new landscape of imagination marked by the consciousness of a future without evolution, and by the exhaustion of physical resources and of progressive energy.

In 1977 Ingmar Bergman directed *The Serpent's Egg*, which, despite not being one of his best movies, is an outstanding insight into the construction of the totalitarian mindset all the same. *The Serpent's Egg* is a movie about the incubation of Nazism through the years from 1923 to 1933. During those years, the egg of the serpent was slowly opening, and giving birth to the monster. In the time that followed the students' uprising of March 1977 in Bologna and Rome, I also felt that the egg of the serpent was incubating. A similar feeling spread with the punk movement in the following years – we detected the smell of a new totalitarianism in the making.

It is not a political defeat of the social movement, but an anthropological mutation that is seen to be the defining mark of the fin de siècle that began in 1977. The occupation of the social consciousness by the ubiquitous screen of television, the colonization of the unconscious and the competitive perversion of desire, the beginning of the Neoliberal aggression: these were the signs of the

imminent hatching of the serpent's egg.

In modern times the concept of evolution implied physical expansion and economic growth, yet since the seventies, this equation has begun to be exposed as false. The population saturation of the Earth space and the exhaustion of the physical resources of the planet suggest that human evolution cannot proceed with the current rate of expansive consumption of energy.

Since 1977, evidence of a crisis of the Western faith in the future has proliferated, but at the threshold of the millennium the perception of a collapse becomes irrepressible. The exceptional event that was the felling of the 'Twin Towers' in a cloud of dust, precipitated by the suicide of nineteen young Muslims, is certainly the most impressive, the most spectacular image-event to inaugurate this new era. Yet the Columbine school massacre might well convey a more uncanny message, because it spoke of daily life, of American normalcy, of the normality of a society that stumbles along looking for some impossible reassurance.

Suicide is no longer a marginal phenomenon of isolated psychopathology, but is becoming a major agent of the political history of our time, and also the marker of an anthropological shift that planetary culture is unable to elaborate. Suicide offers, in my view, a crucial perspective on the history of the present.

Hikikomori

Suicide is a form of behaviour that has often been associated with those periods of anthropological catastrophe which are believed by the affected populations to herald the end of the world. After the Spanish colonization, thousands of Amerindians chose suicide – individually and also in organized forms – because they felt unable to come to terms with the new environment, the condition of slavery, religious obligations and so on. In the nineteenth century, suicide was adopted as a widespread behaviour in the industrial cities of the West, because of the intolerable conditions of urban life in the slums and of industrial work in factories. Suicide is a reaction of humans facing the destruction of their cultural references, and the humiliation of their dignity. This is one of the reasons that it so indelibly marks the landscape of our time.

Since the early 2000s, a variant of suicide – although less dramatic and final – has begun to spread throughout Japan. According to figures released by the Japanese government, as of 2010, 700,000 individuals, with an average age of thirty-one, have made the decision to sever all relations with the outside world, in order to live their lives from behind the locked door of their own room. These

people are officially defined as *hikikomori*, according to diagnostic criteria such as:

1) spending most of the day and nearly every day confined to home;
2) marked and persistent avoidance of social situations;
3) symptoms interfering significantly with the person's normal routine, occupational (or academic) functioning, or social activities or relationships;
4) perceiving the withdrawal as ego-syntonic;
5) having a duration of at least six months; and
6) having no other mental disorder that accounts for the social withdrawal and avoidance.

According to the estimates of the Ministry of Health of Japan, an additional 1.55 million people are on the verge of becoming hikikomori.

Some psychiatrists have attempted to explain the phenomenon in terms of autism or Asperger disorders. However, such a purely psychiatric definition may be little more than an elusive way to avoid the social problem that is implied in the behaviour of so many of Japan's youth. If one reflects on the incredible levels of stress that social life implies, particularly in Japan, the spreading of this phenomenon is not particularly surprising. On the contrary, hikikomori behaviour might appear to many young people as an effective way to avoid the effects of suffering, compulsion, self-violence and humiliation that competition brings about.

According to Michael Zielenziger's book, *Shutting Out the Sun: How Japan Created Its Own Lost Generation*, most of the hikikomori persons he interviewed demonstrate independent thinking and a sense of self that the current Japanese environment could not accommodate. Meeting hikikomori persons during my own journeys in Japan, I found that they are acutely conscious that only by extricating themselves from the routine of daily life could their personal autonomy be preserved. It is a belief that is often shared by those who see suicide as the ultimate solution to life's problems.

Puputan

Puputan is a Balinese word that refers to the enactment of mass ritual suicide as a means to avoid the humiliation of surrender. Two of the most remarkable cases of puputan occurred in 1906 and 1908, when the Balinese were subjugated by the Dutch. Their anniversaries are remembered every year with ceremonies held

across Bali.

On 20 September 1906, Dutch armed forces invaded Bali. Having landed in Sanur Beach, the battalions approached the palaces of Denpasar, meeting little resistance from the Balinese. When the Dutch troops surrounded the palaces, the Balinese forces were clearly overwhelmed. Against the silent background of a seemingly deserted city, a wild beating of drums reached the Dutch from within the palace walls. Shortly afterwards, a silent procession of magnificently dressed officials, guards, priests, wives, children and retainers began to exit the main gates. At their head there was the palanquin carrying the Raja himself, who was dressed in traditional white cremation garments, adorned with magnificent jewellery, and armed with a ceremonial kris.

The procession stopped a short distance from the Dutch troops. The Raja stepped down from the palanquin and a priest plunged his dagger into his breast. Thereupon, the rest of the procession commenced a mass act of collective suicide, each person who had joined the procession from the palace ritually killing the other, in a final act of solidarity and friendship. Local historians say that more than one thousand young Balinese died in the puputan. Once the mass suicide was over, the Dutch stripped the corpses of their valuables and burned the great palace of Denpasar to the ground.

With the puputan, suicide takes the form of a ritual of belonging. It is a final and deadly reaffirmation of the sense of belonging to a community that refuses to bend to the overwhelming force of an enemy, to accept a defeat that would lead to the obliteration of any sense of dignity. In this case, military defeat and colonial occupation are not perceived merely as instances of political humiliation, but as a complete eradication of identity, as the cancellation of a world of moral belonging.

When, in the perception of those living within a cultural environment, that environment is destroyed – and with it the possibility of attributing meaning to their life – it is possible to talk in terms of ‘the end of the world’. Surviving in such conditions means literally surviving the end of the world, in a condition of meaninglessness and loneliness, in a perpetual condition wherein the exchange of meaningful signs with one’s fellow creatures is impossible.

Here we find the suicidal effect of colonization: the density of meaning that pertains to the living environment is cancelled by the colonial re-codification. The extermination of the indigenous population which marked the colonization of the American continent was, first and foremost, a cultural genocide, above and beyond the facts of the genocidal massacre itself.

It is in the obliteration of the means to read a meaningful ‘world’ in the surrounding natural and cultural signs that suicide appears to be the only possible response to the intolerability of a life permanently devoid of

recognition, and, particularly, devoid of a sustainable recognition of the self.

The Capture

According to Jonathan Crary, author of *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, the capitalist need for market growth inevitably leads to an attempt to expand periods of alertness, through a restless stimulation of social attention: 'the relentless capture and control of time and experience are the form of contemporary progress'.[2]

The assault on social attention, which, according to Crary, is crucial for the contemporary economy, reduces the time available for emotional elaboration. Crary is particularly interested in the effects of this assault on the time dedicated to sleep.

> It should be no surprise that there is an erosion of sleep now everywhere. Over the course of the twentieth century there were steady inroads made against the time of sleep – the average North American adult now sleeps approximately six and a half hours a night, an erosion from eight hours a generation ago, and (hard as it is to believe) from ten hours in the early twentieth century.[3]

Sleep, in fact, can be considered an 'uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism'.[4] A society of insomniac people is not at all a comforting place, and the increase in productivity is paid for in terms of the loss of rationality and of respect for life. The irrational exuberance of financial agents who take drugs in order to trade on their computers day and night has already brought the world to the brink of an abyss, a scenario that is likely to be perpetuated many more times to come.

Crary goes on to argue that 'sleep is the only remaining barrier, the only enduring natural condition that capitalism cannot eliminate'.[5] Although in itself an accurate prognosis, this observation lacks a crucial element. The other enduring natural condition that capitalism cannot eliminate, the other enduring natural barrier to the financial intrusive hubris, is death.

Suicide Epidemics

Suicide is spreading epidemically, as an effect of social stress, emotional

impoverishment, and the constant assault on attention. According to the World Health Organization, in the last forty-five years, suicide rates have increased by 60 per cent worldwide. These figures do not include suicide attempts, which are up to twenty times more frequent than successful suicides. It is perhaps not coincidental that these have been the years of the comprehensive implementation of the capitalist model worldwide; the years of thorough submission of attention time to the rhythm of the economic machine.

The World Health Organization indicates that these figures should be considered as underestimates:

> This can partly be explained by religious and sociocultural taboos around suicide and also by weak civil registration and health information systems in some countries. The result is a lack of accurate information as to the extent of the problem, the methods used for attempted and completed suicide and the groups particularly at risk for attempted and completed suicides.[6]

Furthermore, there is a remarkable increase in the incidence of suicides among younger members of the population:

> Although traditionally suicide rates have been highest among the male elderly, rates among young people have been increasing to such an extent that they are now the group at highest risk in a third of countries, in both developed and developing countries.

Although I am persuaded that suicide is a problem of great importance for our times, my focus is not on the impressive increase in the number of people who commit or try to commit suicide, but on the particular significance that the act is coming to acquire at the social and cultural level.

An epidemic of unhappiness is spreading across the planet, while capital absolutism is asserting its right to unfettered control of our lives. As bio-semiocapitalism infiltrates the nervous cells of conscious sensible organisms, it inoculates in them a thanato-political rationale, a morbid sentiment which is progressively taking hold of the collective unconscious, culture and sensibility. The biopolitical effect of semiocapitalism (better said: the thanatological effect of semiocapitalism) is essentially the capture of cognitive activity, and the subjection of the faculty of expression of the linguistic animal to the sleepless, aggressive dynamics of the labour market.

Language is captured by the networked machine and turned into an essentially productive activity. Herein lies the trap: people are encouraged to consider their

linguistic competence as factors of economic competition, and to manage and invest in them as such. Creativity, expressiveness, affection, emotion – the human soul, in other words – are considered to be productive factors, and consequently, they are evaluated according to standards of productivity. Exploitation, competition, precariousness, redundancy are not perceived as the effects of a conflictual social relationship, but are internalized as deficiencies of the self, as personal inadequacies. The unceasing restructuring of the organization of work is perceived as humiliation and brutality.

Only non-involvement and the ability to remain extraneous, to refuse any identification with one's job and with one's working condition, only a radical rejection of the ethics of responsibility, might offer workers the possibility of navigating a way out from this productivity blackmail.

Unfortunately, the ethics of responsibility, the phoney discourse on participation and collaboration, are prevailing in today's political and cultural life. We invest our psychic energies and our expectations into work because our intellectual and affective life is poor, because we are depressed, anxious and insecure. So we are trapped. The industrial worker who was obliged to repeat the same gesture a thousand times every day had no reason to identify with her work – so she invested her psychological energies into solidarity with colleagues, and her mind was free to hate the assembly line, and to entertain thoughts that had nothing to do with her daily slavery. Conversely, cognitive workers have been lured into the trap of creativity: their expectations are submitted to the productivity blackmail because they are obliged to identify their soul (the linguistic and emotional core of their activity) with their work. Social conflicts and dissatisfaction are perceived as psychological failures whose effect is the destruction of self-esteem.

The French psychoanalyst Cristophe Dejours has written widely about this trap. In *La Souffrance au travail* he approaches a phenomenon which has been almost completely neglected by sociologists and psychologists alike: that of suicide in the workplace. He observes that, in the past, work and suicide had little in common. Industrial workers did suffer the separation between their productive activity and their mental life, but this suffering forced them to look beyond daytime work and to invest their psychic energy in solidarity. For cognitive workers, particularly in conditions of precariousness, solidarity is rare. Everyone feels alone, pushed to compete, at the mercy of precariousness.

Individual Evaluation

On 26 September 2009 the front page of the French daily *Le Monde* opened with an article concerning productivity, ruthless competition and suicide of the employees at France Telecom.

France Telecom, one of the most important tele-corporations in the world, was privatized in 1998. During the telecoms boom of the late nineties, France Telecom bought Orange, and the debt of the company escalated to 70 billion euros. In the following years a major restructuring drive reduced this figure, at the workers' expense. From 2004 a recovery plan named 'NeXT scheme' was implemented: it was essentially aimed at reducing costs, especially wage costs, continuing a convergence policy for its products and services, and grouping together all the brands under the single brand of Orange.

This recovery plan introduced an aggressive management style, whose top priority was to reduce the workforce. Forty thousand workers were fired in the eight years between 2002 and 2010.

Since two-thirds of the France Telecom workers had public servant status, they could not be sacked, so the new directors ordered continuous changes of jobs and locations in order to dispirit well-qualified employees, most of whom were in their forties and fifties, and to force them to leave. Meanwhile, countless others remained stuck in high-pressure call centres, where individuals were expected to compete against each other for monthly results-based bonuses.

'In a nutshell, it's gone from a public service culture to a cash machine', said Ivan du Roy, author of *Stressed Orange*, a book that maps out the company's transformation.

The story of France Telecom turned Orange is one of the most impressive examples of corporate restructuring based on a vision of individualism, competition, and so-called 'meritocracy', a euphemistic expression to describe a jungle in which workers wage daily war against each other, obliged to fight for a salary dependent on productivity and economic results. The blackmail of meritocracy fuels individualism, and in turn, individualism breaks collaboration, thus making work less, not more productive.

Hierarchy, obedience, submission, humiliation and psychological violence are the weapons employed by Neoliberal philosophy against the political solidarity of the workforce. These weapons have consolidated the political power of the elite, while failing to foster productivity and work efficiency. As a consequence, workers feel politically disempowered, lonely and victimized, driven to exert ever more psycho-physical effort in order to meet the demands of the management.

What happened in France Telecom–Orange is nothing exceptional. Over the last decade, many industrial companies in the world, and particularly in Europe, have done the same: increased productivity; set workers one against the other;

displaced workers from their workplace in order to break their community and ultimately their resistance; and, finally, made their lives utterly precarious. Such aggression against the psychological well-being of employees has been a crucial aspect of the strategy of capitalist absolutism. No wonder if the outcome is an avalanche of suicides.

France Telecom unions claim that thirty-five employees committed suicide over two years. The management argued that the suicide rate at France Telecom is lower than the French average, but many of the employees left notes before committing or attempting to commit suicide in which they blamed stress at work, psychological violence and humiliation.

This is the problem: the direct relation between the privatization of the enterprise, the restructuring of the work space, the precarization of the worker's life – and suicide. The suicides of France Telecom workers cannot be ascribed to psychological vulnerability but essentially to the distressing and humiliating organization of work. The boss charges you with an impossible task, which you are expected to fulfil in any case: this is what is called 'autonomy of work', or meritocracy and individual evaluation. You are expected to cope with whatever is thrown at you, without argument: this is the hideous refrain of the management.

Why do employees accept these impossible tasks? Why do they bend to every demand of their bosses? Why *don't* they oppose them instead? The answer is crystal clear: because solidarity is now broken, and every worker is alone, facing the blackmail of merit, the humiliation of failure, the threat of being made redundant. What follows is a sense of guilt, anxiety and reciprocal resentment for the perceived mutual inability to help each other, to build solidarity. This is how the heavy architecture of shared depression is built.

One Monday morning of October 2009 Jean-Paul Rouanet, a fifty-one-year-old father of two, parked his car on the hard shoulder of a highway overpass outside the Alpine town of Annecy. As he clambered over the parapet, rush-hour motorists a hundred yards below screamed at him not to jump. After a moment's hesitation, he dropped into the void. Rouanet was the twenty-fourth employee of France Telecom to take his life in nineteen months. Two months before committing suicide he had been moved from a back office job at Orange to a 'reactive' call centre where he was expected simultaneously to respond to customer complaints and to charm them into buying new services. He left his wife a suicide note in which he wrote that his work had driven him to despair. 'He was not a depressed man', she cried.

Another worker left a message denouncing 'management through terror' at work.

One day a depressed employee arrived at his place of work with a hunting

rifle and ammunition in his pocket. Colleagues successfully persuaded him to put the gun down, and the management decided that he would not be punished.

The strategy of the company is to make people so stressed that they lose every autonomy, any sense of solidarity, thus becoming totally dependent on the automatisms of exploitation. 'Individual evaluation' is the basic conceptual tool of this strategy. This strategy is effectively murderous, as its phoney rhetoric of individual merit and universal competition produces a poisonous atmosphere of rivalry, envy, disloyalty, distrust. Indeed, the true scandal is not suicide, but what happens after a suicide. What happens? Nothing. People go back to their workplace scared, humiliated and lonely.

No strikes have been organized at France Telecom in the wake of this suicidal wave.

Loneliness and lack of concern for fellow workers are simultaneously the cause and effect of the absence of collective action. And suicide is the only rational solution in such a perfect Nash equilibrium of depression, despair and increasing corporate gains.

After eight years of cuts and numerous cases of worker suicide, in 2010, France Telecom declared an increase of revenues to 45.5 billion euros.

Italian Steel

'Here lived the umpteenth victim of lung cancer. March 8, 2012.' Thus reads a plaque on the wall of a building in the southern Italian city of Taranto. Giuseppe Corisi died of lung cancer at sixty-three years of age after working for thirty years in the ILVA steel plant, where 8 per cent of European steel is produced. The incidence of cancer in Taranto is over 30 per cent higher than the national average, and the statistics for lung, kidney and liver cancer are far higher still. Medical studies have shown that children's health is also heavily compromised by the pollution in the area surrounding the plant.

Dr Patrizio Mazza, director of the Hematology Department of Taranto Hospital, thinks that things can get worse in the future, if measures are not taken to reduce the levels of pollution: 'toxic substances accumulate, they have a cumulative effect over time.'

Environmental concerns have been escalating in Taranto in recent years because of the activity of the steel plant. An ordinance of the City Council forbids children from playing in unpaved lots, and in 2008, a local farmer was forced to slaughter 2,000 sheep after it was discovered that they were contaminated with dioxin.

In 2012, judicial investigations led to the decision to stop production in some parts of the factory, but this move provoked violent reactions. Workers and their families fear for their health, but an even greater fear is the prospect of losing one's salary. Unions have mobilized against the judicial decision to stop production, while citizens have regrouped under the name of *Liberi e pensanti* (Free and Thinking Workers and Citizens) to reject the blackmail and reclaim the right to both a salary and clean air.

After months of conflict, strikes and demonstrations, the national government finally decided that production should not be suspended, notwithstanding the injunction of the judges.

'If ILVA shuts down, it would be a great favour to German and French steel producers in this time of crisis. Our international competitors simply have vested interests in the plant to close', said one governmental economist from his studio in Milano, six hundred miles from the smoke of the factory and from the community that is expected to commit suicide for the sake of the national economy.

'Better to die of cancer than of hunger', a woman from Taranto told a journalist.[7]

Monsanto's Harvest

Indian farmers have been killing themselves in record numbers over the last twenty years. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data from 2009, more than 216,000 farmers have killed themselves in India since 1997. Include the figures for 1995, 1996 and 2010, and the death toll exceeds 250,000.

Speaking on the subject, 'Death on the Farm: Agrarian Crisis and Inequality' at the Institute of Development Studies in Kolkata, P. Sainath, editor of the magazine *Hindu Rural Affair*, outlined the magnitude of the problem: 'We have been undergoing the largest catastrophe of our independent history – the suicides of nearly a quarter of a million farmers since 1995. We are talking of the largest recorded rate of suicides in human history.'

It is my view that suicide cannot be reduced to a single cause, given the psychological complexity of the decision to renounce one's own life. But when the figures are so incredibly high, when suicide becomes a mass phenomenon, some basic common motivations are likely to be found.

The Indian newspapers, in reporting the wave of suicide cases, attributed their cause to the farmers' indebtedness to money-lenders. In need of loans in order to buy the agricultural company Monsanto's expensive and ineffective seeds, the

farmers were left with no income to repay the loan, and faced a situation in which suicide seemed the only option available to them.

Often, farmers would kill themselves by drinking the very same insecticide that Monsanto had supplied them with – a gruesome testament to the culpability of the company in devastating the lives of once proud independent farmers. 'We bought 100 grams of BT Cotton. Our crop failed twice. My husband had become depressed. He went out to his field, lay down in the cotton and swallowed insecticide', a thirty-eight-year-old widow reported to a newspaper.[8] Tragically, the cycle of desperation does not end with these cases of suicide, as surviving members of the families that are ravaged by the loss of their loved ones are left to economic ruin, and often struggle to avoid starvation.

In 2009, Vandana Shiva wrote an article entitled 'From Seeds of Suicide to Seeds of Hope: Why Are Indian Farmers Committing Suicide and How Can We Stop This Tragedy?', in which she openly states that the roots of the tragedy can be found in the policies of trade liberalization and corporate globalization. Her article explicitly discusses what she terms a 'suicide economy':

> The suicide economy of industrialized, globalised agriculture is suicidal at 3 levels: it is suicidal for farmers, it is suicidal for the poor who are deprived of food, and it is suicidal at the level of the human species as we destroy the natural capital of seed, biodiversity, soil and water on which our biological survival depends.[9]

In 2008, the *Daily Mail* labelled the suicide spree as 'the GM [genetically modified] Genocide'. Leaving aside the question of whether GM organisms are an actual threat to human health and biodiversity, the economic aspect of the problem appears to be very clear. Since the nineties, the policies of structural adjustment supported by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have forced India to adopt new agricultural policies, and to open up the market to corporations such as Montanto and Cargill. In Vandana Shiva's words,

> The global corporations changed the input economy overnight. Farm saved seeds were replaced by corporate seeds, which need fertilizers and pesticides and cannot be saved.
>
> Corporations prevent seed savings through patents and by engineering seeds with non-renewable traits. As a result, poor peasants have to buy new seeds for every planting season and what was traditionally a free resource, available by putting aside a small portion of the crop, becomes a commodity. This new expense increases poverty and leads to indebtness … The crisis of suicides shows how the survival of small farmers

is incompatible with the seed monopolies of global corporations. The region in India with the highest level of farmers suicides is the Vidharbha region in Maharashtra – 4000 suicides per year, 10 per day. This is also the region with the highest acreage of Monsanto's GMO Bt cotton. Monsanto's GM seeds create a suicide economy by transforming seed from a renewable resource to a non-renewable input which must be bought every year at high prices.[10]

Foxconn's Rage

The Foxconn factory – the largest factory in the world, where around 400,000 human beings spend their days and their nights assembling electronic devices – is owned by Taiwan's Hon Hai Precision Industry. At the end of 2011, opening the company's annual general meeting in Hong Kong, CEO Terry Gou announced to shareholders that, in the plants of the corporation, overtime will be limited to no more than three hours per day. Outside the conference hall, protesters were picketing the meeting, accusing both Foxconn and Apple of poor corporate ethics after the suicide of eleven workers in a few days, most of whom jumped from buildings of the factory.

Demonstrators held signs carrying slogans such as 'Workers are not machines', and cardboard cut-outs of Apple Chief Executive Steve Jobs wearing devil's horns; another placard featured the company logo and the words 'Bloody Apple'.

Foxconn has earned a toxic reputation for the militaristic labour discipline in its gargantuan factories. In 2010, a string of worker suicides focused international scrutiny on its Longhua factory campus in Shenzhen, which houses and employs an army of 400,000 workers, mostly migrant youth from China's hinterland. The deaths – eighteen in all, with dozens of others narrowly averted – were widely interpreted as an existential response to the brutality of the prevailing factory conditions, heightened by an oppressive production schedule brought on by the insatiable market demand for Apple's iPad and iPhone.

In response, Terry Gou took a series of steps to prevent further tragedies: 3 million square metres of yellow-mesh netting were installed around the dormitory buildings to catch jumpers; a counselling center was set up; workers' wages were increased by 30 per cent; new hires were asked to sign a no-suicide pledge.

In *The Exorcist and the Machines*, Andrew Ross writes of the wave of suicides in the factories of the Foxconn group. After the twelfth jump from the dormitory windows, a worker's blog carried this post: 'Perhaps for the Foxconn employees

like for us … the use of death is simply to testify that we were ever alive at all, and that while we lived, we had only despair'.

In order to understand the causes of the epidemic of Foxconn suicides, Ross writes:

> The one labor rights group with access to the new factories, Hong Kong-based Students & Scholars Against Corporate Misbehaviour, reported that a year after Foxconn's initial response to the suicides, most of the company's promises regarding increased wages, reduced overtime, improved worker-management communication, and internship regulation remained unfulfilled.
>
> For the best part of two decades, anti-sweatshop activists have tried to force consumers in the global North to confront the human costs that lie behind their clothing purchases. Whether the same moral crusade can be applied to IT products remains to be seen. For their part, Foxconn's Longhua workers used the most extreme means at their disposal to generate public attention – 'To die is the only way to testify that we ever lived.' Through their suicides, they spelled out the literal implications of the 'dead labor' precept used by Marx to explain the process of capitalist production. Nor are they likely to be the last to publicize their alienation in this way.[11]

One day, a few young workers of Foxconn decided to alter the terms of their planned suicide. Instead of jumping from a window, or hanging themselves or setting themselves on fire, a group of them acquired explosives and transformed themselves into human bombs, setting ablaze some of Foxconn's buildings and destroying the product of their own labours.

Zombies

Suicide was seen as the only way out by the slaves of Haiti's plantations, who killed themselves by the thousand, in spite of the fact that, in so doing, they faced what they believed to be the prospect of spending eternity incarnated as a living zombie.

In an article published in the *New York Times*, Amy Wilentz explains the story behind the mythology of the zombie:

> For the slave under French rule in Haiti – then Saint-Domingue – in the 17th and 18th centuries, life was brutal: hunger, extreme overwork and cruel discipline were the rule … The only escape from the sugar plantations was

death, which was seen as a return to Africa, or *lan guinée* (literally Guinea, or West Africa). This is the phrase in Haitian Creole that even now means heaven. The plantation meant a life in servitude; *lan guinée* meant freedom. Death was feared but also wished for. Not surprisingly, suicide was a frequent recourse of the slaves, who were handy with poisons and powders. The plantation masters thought of suicide as the worst kind of thievery, since it deprived the master not only of a slave's service, but also of his or her person, which was, after all, the master's property. Suicide was the slave's only way to take control over his or her own body.

For the slave only death opens the way to freedom and makes possible a return to the homeland which is beyond the Ocean. The black Ocean of death is the gate of the bright paradise lost. But not everybody will be able to go back home, many will get lost and become zombies. This was the scarecrow keeping slaves from killing themselves.[12]

According to anthropologist and ethno-botanist Wade Davis, a living person can be turned into a zombie by the inoculation into their blood stream of two types of powder, both available in Haiti: tetrodotoxin, a powerful neurotoxin that can be found in the flesh of the puffer fish, and datura, a dissociative drug. Davis wrote two books on this subject: *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985) and *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie* (1988). It is not surprising that the myth of the zombie has returned to play a prominent role in the contemporary imagination, and particularly in Western popular culture and cinema.

In China, in an attempt to discourage the factory's young workers from committing suicide, Foxconn will no longer pay compensation to the families of employees who kill themselves. According to spokespeople at the Shenzhen complex, the company had 'concrete evidence' that some of its employees killed themselves in order to win compensation money for their families. Some victims' families have received more than 100,000 yuan ($14,640), according to the press agency Xinhua.

'The act is wrong. Life is precious. To prevent such tragedies, Foxconn is to cease releasing compensation other than that provided by law', reads the official communiqué of the management. Don't forget: life is precious.

Like the plantation masters of Haiti, the Foxconn management regard suicide as the worst kind of thievery. Their response is to create new zombies, through the spectre of death without compensation.

Why Are Bankers Committing Suicide?

It is not only Indian farmers, Chinese workers and French employees who are committing suicide in unexpected numbers. Bankers too seem eager to immolate themselves on the altar of financial capitalism.

Banks trade on being perceived as unsinkable ironclads, as unshakeable pillars in the foundations of the global financial system. But when we consider the bankers themselves – those individuals who wield the power and money, those professionals who dole out bonuses for cheating savers and corrupting politicians – it would be a mistake to ascribe any of the stability that we might perceive in the institutions that they represent. Not a week seems to pass without a banker or trader committing suicide. In the first month of 2014 alone, eleven bank executives have taken their own lives.

Countless financial websites and magazines have attempted to explain the deaths of these rich, high-profile individuals, but the motivations remain elusive. Some were thought to be anxious about legal investigations, others were generally stressed out and exhausted. Perhaps, some of them also felt a sense of guilt – who knows?

A key to interpret this phenomenon may be found in Alden Cass's book *Bullish Thinking: The Advisor's Guide to Surviving and Thriving on Wall Street*, published in 2008, before the subprime bubble burst. Cass's book might be replete with platitudes, but its subject is undeniably attractive: those who profit from the absurd factory of unhappiness and inequality that goes under the name of 'the financial system' also suffer from exhaustion, burn-out and, in some cases, from extreme anxiety. Clearly, the point is not to force oneself to feel sorry for a bunch of millionaires who jump off buildings in the heart of Manhattan or London. But it is worth considering exactly what this string of suicides and the huge consumption of psychopharmacological drugs in the financial milieu has to tell us.

> At 9 p.m. at the end of a hectic 12-hour day, John, a successful 38-year-old million-dollar producer at a major wirehouse in downtown Manhattan closed the door to his office and took the elevator to the thirty-sixth floor of his office building. Despondent over recent losses his clients had suffered in the market over the past year, John had been short-tempered and adversarial with colleagues as well as with his branch manager, and threatened to leave the industry on more than one occasion. He had a long history of mood swings, which seemed to only worsen when he was faced with difficult events at work. This business was crushing him … When the elevator door closed behind him, he took the stairs to the roof where he breathed in the cool night air. With an empty stare, he slowly made his way across the roof with a purposeful pace. John walked to the roof's ledge,

looked out across the looming dark city skyline, mumbled a prayer for his wife and children, closed his eyes and jumped.

The next day it was business as usual on Wall Street.[13]

Alden Cass has an easy explanation for this phenomenon: 'You live with constant uncertainty. You ride the wild, frenetic, and unpredictable market fluctuations every day and the pressure for you to master the ups and downs is beyond comprehension'.[14]

Uncertainty is the constant bedfellow of precariousness, and the unpredictability and incomprehensibility of a process that one is expected perfectly to understand and manage act as powerful sources of psychological destabilization. According to Cass, these high-powered, high-pressured professionals become particularly vulnerable the moment the job that they regard as a part of their identity fails to match up to the expectations that they set for themselves. Constant comparison with one's peers is inevitable in an environment dictated by the ideology and culture of competition. The desire to succeed over one's peers becomes the only justification for the systematic violence and humiliation that they consciously inflict on the majority of human beings, a majority that has little to do with the financial market, except to suffer the consequences of its mismanagement.

These people have to be brutally cynical in order to do their job, since their job is based on cheating, humiliating and impoverishing countless communities. Cynicism is not an easy burden to carry, and demands of those who bear it an unshakeable self-image of the winner, the invincible *Übermensch*. The cynical loser is subject to extreme danger. This hints at one possible explanation for why bankers are killing themselves – the occasional moment of self-awareness, revealing the yawning abyss that they have been excavating inside themselves while operating in a kind of moral vacuum.

Ultimately, bankers' suicides can be read as a symptom of the impotence of power. The impotence, in this case, relates to the inability to understand and to change, and the awareness of being part of a deadly machine that one can profit from but cannot ever entirely control. In the wake of the financial collapse of 2008, as the pressure for increasing taxes on the hyper-rich increased, it is worth noting the thoughts of one of the wealthiest men in the world on the subject of taxes. 'My secretary Debbie Bosanek', said Warren Buffett, 'pays a rate of 35.8 per cent of income, while I myself am paying a rate at 17.4 per cent'. Bosanek, who had been working for Buffet since 1993, added: 'Everyone in our office is paying a higher tax rate than Warren'.

A question comes to mind: how can it be that nothing has changed in the tax system since then? Why is Buffett still paying a lower rate of tax than his

secretary? Six years after campaigning with the words, ‘Yes we can’, President Obama has been obliged to recognize in 2014 that the world is a very complicated matter. Better late than never. An army of lawyers and consultants are busy shoring up the interests of financial capitalists against regulations like the Dodd–Frank Act (intended to prevent further financial crises and more bank bailouts), which are consequently blocked and undermined. The infinite complication of the system makes effective control of financial activity impossible. And big banks that have proved to be too big to fail are also too big to change.

1 Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, p. 65.

2 Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, London: Verso, 2013, p. 40.

3 Ibid., p. 11.

4 Ibid., p. 10.

5 Ibid., p. 74.

6 World Health Organization, ‘World Suicide Prevention Day 2012’, 10 September 2012.

7 Vittorio Feltri, *Il Giornale*, 16 August 2012.

8 Andrew Malone, ‘The GM Genocide: Thousands of Indian Farmers Are Committing Suicide After Using Genetically Modified Crops’, *Daily Mail*, 3 November 2008.

9 Vandana Shiva, ‘From Seeds of Suicide to Seeds of Hope: Why Are Indian Farmers Committing Suicide and How Can We Stop This Tragedy?’, *Huffington Post*, 29 May 2009.

10 Ibid.

11 Andrew Ross, *The Exorcist and the Machines*, p. 12.

12 Amy Wilentz, ‘A Zombie Is a Slave Forever’, *New York Times*, 30 October 2012.

13 Alden Cass, Brian F. Shaw and Sydney LeBlanc, *Bullish Thinking*, p. 5.

14 Ibid., p. 1.

Chapter 10

A Journey to Seoul

Incheon Airport

I had been hesitant for weeks. After finally accepting the invitation of the South Korean publisher of some of my books, I had second thoughts and attempted to reverse my initial commitment. I was put off by the distance, the humid hot weather of summer in Seoul.

I sent him an email: 'I'm too sick for this journey. I suffer from asthma, the long flight and the sultry moisture would be bad for my health'.

But my publisher, a very understanding man, kindly insisted: 'Do you really believe that the Northern Koreans will launch a nuclear bomb while you stay here?'

The sarcasm of his message helped me overcome my worries and in the end I decided to go to Seoul.

I spent happy days there, where I was finally offered an insight into the desert of the present in its purest version.

As I experienced the city of Seoul, I could peruse the signs of the urban environment, of daily life, and I tried to understand the legacy of the historical past on the skin of the present. By the end of the twentieth century, after decades of war, humiliation, starvation, bombings and destruction of its cities, the physical and anthropological landscape of this country was reduced to a sort of devastated abstraction. Then, in a matter of years, human life and the city were entirely and profoundly transformed by a form of contemporary nihilism at its most advanced degree.

South Korea is the laboratory of the connective neohuman world. It is the ground zero of the world, a blueprint for the future of the planet.

At Incheon airport two organizers of my lectures came to welcome me: artist and architect Eunseon Park, the editor and director of the magazine *Listen to the City*, and the young scholar Junsung Kim, who is studying visual art in New York City, spending time as a resident artist in Chiang Mai, and occasionally taking

part in the cultural life of the city of his parents, Seoul.

The airport is built on an island, and the bridge runs along the sea. From the windows of the comfortable car driven by Kim I looked out at the landscape. Chimneystacks all along the coastal line dissolved in a mystical fog, grey on grey. The sea had receded and the ground was grey and brownish like the sky. Abstraction grey. Calmly, intensely, hopelessly, the ultimate abstraction took hold of me.

History, Obliteration and Simulation

Although culturally influenced by the Chinese, the Korean peninsula managed to remain insulated from the world until the beginning of the past century.

When, in 1919, the world convened in Versailles, every country was represented at the Congress; even the young Vietnamese Ho Chi Minh, who could not attend in person, sent a petition for the independence of his country from France. But in those years, Korea was occupied by the Japanese Army, and it could not take part in the meeting. A Korean graduate of Princeton University whose name was Syngman Rhee tried to travel to Paris but was refused a passport. After the Second World War, he became the president of the newly independent South Korea.

The peninsula was invaded by the Japanese Army in 1910. The annexation marked the end of the Yi (Chosun) Dynasty which had ruled the country since 1392. The ensuing occupation was brutal, and aimed to erase national identity, the national language, and any form of national pride. Since 1933 small-scale guerrilla activities along the Manchurian-Korean border, led by Kim Il-sung and supported by the Soviet Army, started the resistance against the Japanese.

During the Second World War, the Japanese implemented in Korea a prostitution system similar to the one established in other parts of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Comfort women (*ianfu*) were abducted from their homes, or lured with the promise of works in factories and restaurants, then forced into sexual slavery.

After the final Japanese defeat, the country was divided into a Northern entity occupied by the Soviets and ruled by Kim Il-sung, and a Southern entity occupied by the United States and presided over by Sungman Rhee.

A new war was inevitable, and it duly broke out in June 1950. The following three years witnessed atrocities against civilians, devastating bombings, mass starvation and countless casualties. After the armistice of 1953, the country emerged from the war in conditions of extreme poverty and divided into two

states. By 1960, both states were under ferocious dictatorships. Kim Il-sung ruled the North, while Park Chung Hee, a general who had collaborated with the Japanese, ruled the South.

As both North Korea and South Korea started to rebuild from scratch, two different simulations emerged from the obliteration of the past: Kim Il-sung's *Juche* simulation, a sort of mystical communism with hyper-nationalist overtones, and Park's expeditious process of industrialization, which led South Korea to the long-lasting growth that makes it today the eleventh most industrialized country in the world.

I talk of two simulations because both Kim Il-sung and Park Chung Hee imagined the future in ways that are similarly based on the simulation of a vanished identity of the Korean people.

Simulation is a copy which has no prototype, the imitation of something that does not exist, and has never existed except than in the simulator's mind. The Northern simulation is the mandatory exhibition of happiness and popular celebration of the glorious achievements of the semi-gods who lead the country, the immortal Founding Father Kim Il-sung, his son and his nephew. It is not simple propaganda; it is something more immersive and all-encompassing than this. It is the daily scenario in which everybody has to live their lives.

The Southern simulation is a computer-aided simulation, a sort of digital second life which has devoured the first, occupying the entire space of imagination and communication. Samsung has simultaneously redesigned the physical feature of the country, and supplied every person in the country with a cellular tool for orientation in a territory which is just the projection of the map.

While traditional cornerstones of the old Confucianism were family and respect for parents, in North Korea a new concept of family emerged: the work collective, the party, the national state, submitted to the unquestionable authority of a new father figure, the Great Leader, the Suryong. According to the *Juche* ideology elaborated by Kim Il-sung, 'the Suryong (Leader) is an impeccable brain of the living body, the masses can be endowed with their life in exchange for their loyalty to him, and the Party is the nerve of that living body'.

> To hammer these concepts into the minds of the population every person has to study them on a daily basis. The day begins at 8.00 am with a one-hour study session under the direction of a party official. Then work starts and goes on until 8.00 pm when a session of collective discussion and self-criticism is held until 10.00 pm.[1]

What first comes to mind when I try to imagine the reality of daily life in North Korea – as Adam Johnson also does in his interesting book *The Orphan Master's*

Son – is a colourless version of Peter Weir's movie *The Truman Show*: black, white and grey mandatory displays of faith, trust and enthusiastic participation in the common patriotic enterprise.

In the South, the display of happiness is less mandatory than in the Northern communist paradise. However, since the Southern simulation is based on the militaristic application of the economic creed, a display of happiness is strongly recommended to anybody aiming to succeed in the only game which counts: the game of wealth, of course.

While the North appears motionless, frozen in the repetition of rituals that have lost all their meaning but which still must be performed immutably, things have changed during the decades in the Southern Korean politics. After two decades of military dictatorship, the Kwangjiu insurrection of 1980, and elections which renovated the political elite, South Korea has known a period of democratic transformation, bolstered by the economic explosion of the electronic revolution, both in industry and in daily life. Yet, for a society that has lost most of its past physical and cultural landscape, the economic creed remains the common ground of identification.

The Perfectly Recombinant City

Hangul, the Korean alphabet invented in the fifteenth century by King Sejong, seems to be one of the sources of the recent economic success of the country. It is the only writing system in the world for which the name of its creator and the date of its invention are specifically known. King Sejong, the fourth monarch of the Joseon Dynasty, was an enlightened despot who decided to create a tool for increasing the people's knowledge of laws, and commissioned the creation of *Hunminjeongeum*, today called Hangul, an alphabet intended to translate in the easiest way the sound of spoken language.

The aristocratic elite of the Kingdom and the functionaries of the Court were culturally influenced by the Chinese, and did not approve the promulgation of a national alphabet, fearing that common people could threaten their power. Notwithstanding the opposition of the privileged class, Hangul spread among the population, particularly among women, and by the twentieth century it completely replaced the Chinese logographic system of writing.

According to many linguists and anthropologists, the ability of Koreans to transmit digital content faster than in any other country of the world is an effect of the Hangul writing system, which is ideally suited for digital technology.

Unlike other alphabetic writing systems Hangul has a similar number of

> consonants and vowels. Thus, when designing a keyboard it is possible to arrange consonants and vowels symmetrically, assigning 14 keys to the consonants on the left and 12 keys to the vowels on the right. Cellphone keypads have far fewer keys than computer keyboards, but since there are only eight basic letters in Hangul before adding strokes or combining letters, sending text messages on a cell phone using Hangul is more convenient and accessible than is the case with other alphabets. Korea's leading cell phone makers applied the basic principles of Hangul in their text-input methods.[2]

Exploring the art galleries and museums and inspecting the faces of young people – their signs and gestures, and the ironic declarations on their T-shirts ('I'm easy but too busy for you') – I was impressed by the importance of design in Seoul's contemporary visual environment. The traces of traditional life are hidden, overtaken by the new designs of life. Social communication has been thoroughly redesigned by the cellular smartphone. Vision has been thoroughly redesigned by screens of all sizes.

The majority of people are ceaselessly looking at their small mobile screens. In the land of Samsung and LG, connection is permanent, whether walking or sitting in a coffee shop or standing, or waiting for the subway train to approach. Hands are constantly busy with smartphones and tablets, fingers delineate infinite whirlpools as they slide across the screens.

Sitting on a park bench, I watched a group of three young girls, standing under a tree, each of them looking at her own phone, taking pictures of the surroundings and of themselves before sharing the results. Smiling at the camera. Standing in silence.

Screens are everywhere: big screens on the walls of skyscrapers, medium-sized screens in the railway station's lobby. But the small private screens of the smartphones demand the undivided devotion of the passing hordes, as they calmly and silently shuffle through the city, heads bowed.

After colonization and wars, after dictatorship and starvation, the South Korean mind, liberated by the burden of the natural body, has smoothly entered the digital sphere, and it has apparently done so with a lesser degree of cultural resistance than any other population in the world. This, I believe, is the main source of the incredible economic performance that this country has staged in the years of the electronic revolution.

In a cultural space already eviscerated by military and cultural aggression, the Korean experience is marked by an extreme degree of individualization and simultaneously by the ultimate immaterial cabling of the collective mind. The individual is a smiling, lonely monad who walks in the urban space in tender

continuous interaction with the photos, the tweets, the games that emanate from a personal screen. The social relation is transformed into a cabled interconnection whose rules and procedures are hidden in the coded linguistincs of the web. Perfectly insulated and perfectly wired, the organism becomes a smooth interface of the flow. In order to access the interaction, the individual must adapt to the format, and their enunciations must be compatible with the code.

Desertification

In the perfectly recombinant city the subway is protected from suicidal events. Walls of transparent material run all along the rails. The train stops and the doors open in a tunnel of crystal.

Nonetheless the number of suicide cases in South Korea has grown more than four-fold over the last three decades. From 6.8 cases per 100,000 people in 1982 to 28.4 in 2011. Today, South Korea has the highest suicide rate among OECD countries, followed by Hungary (19.8), Japan (19.7) and Finland (17.3), and the third highest in the world.

Perhaps the explanation for such a suicide epidemic among the people of South Korea can be found in their recent history. Only two generations ago, starvation was a frequent and widespread experience throughout country. Then, in the space of only two generations, South Korea reached the same level of wealth and consumption of the most advanced countries in the West. But the price of this dramatic improvement has been the desertification of daily life, the hyper-acceleration of rhythms, the extreme individualization of biographies, and an unbridled competition in the work market. Precariousness is also spreading, especially among young people. The cost of education is rising as the Neoliberal reform of university education takes effect. More and more young people have to borrow money from the banks in order to marry and buy a house. Even more fall into debt to pay for their studies. The once-strong worker's movement is increasingly weak, and social resistance is scattered, individualized. The rare cases of workers' resistance are, for the most part, moral displays of outrage and symbolic forms of action. Evictions have become commonplace in the territory of the metropolis, as people are forced out of their homes and small shops requisitioned to make space for corporate building investments and fashionable new buildings.

Koreans have emerged from a situation of such great poverty that to object to their new reality becomes almost inconceivable. In comparison with the

conditions of their grandparents, the present alienation might appear to be a fair price to pay: high-tech capitalism naturally requires ever-increasing productivity and the ceaseless intensification of the rhythms of work.

But for some people, the present alienation is not any less hellish than the misery of the past. The desertification of the landscape and the virtualization of emotional life are converging to causing an immense loneliness and despair in the population that is difficult to consciously oppose. Once made perfectly compatible and recombinant, the organism is wonderfully efficient in the sphere of techno-production, but it is also tremendously frail. Insulation, competition, a sense of meaninglessness, compulsion and failure are the legacy from which twenty-eight people out of every 100,000 succeed in their attempt to escape, while many more try in vain.

Sujonomo N

The purpose of my visit to Seoul was a workshop organized by the group of art-activists Sujonomo N, and a meeting at the local university organized by my publisher, together with a group of students and researchers.

One of the reasons for my hesitation to go to Seoul was a moral consideration. What right do I have to export my present pessimism to a place that I do not know, and particularly to people who have the kindness to pay to listen to me? What right do I have to meet activists, philosophers and artists whose present activity I ignore, and to tell them that I consider suicide to be the most significant political act?

Upon arriving in Seoul however, my hosts puzzled and confounded me, disorienting my expectations and changing the very terms of my philosophical proposal.

The participants of the Sujonomo N workshop were an extremely heterogeneous group. Some of them were professors and researchers from various universities in the city, some were artists and architects, some were very young students. There was a well-known philosopher who had been jailed during the years of the dictatorship, an expert in Russian literature, a charming old literature teacher who had retired to the countryside to grow plants and food, a catholic clergyman, an anarchist, a Buddhist, and the owner of a gasoline station in the suburbs.

Asked about their activity, some of them described themselves as independent researchers who considered Sujonomo N a place where their research could be developed and made public. As in many other countries in the world, the process

of Neoliberal privatization of the university system is making it difficult for a growing number of people in Korea to study and research. Increasingly, young people are dropping out of university – which is more and more expensive but also ever less useful in terms of finding employment – and are creating spaces of self-education and independent research. Members of the Sujonomo N group regularly meet in two spaces in a popular area of Seoul. One is a place for living and sharing food, the other is the place for cultural activity and meetings. They have dinner together in the evening, do yoga and listen to music, and every day they take part in seminars on various subjects. In the same week of my workshop other groups were studying a book on sexuality by Michel Foucault, the thought of Walter Benjamin, and another workshop was dedicated to mathematical problems in computing science.

They are not the kind of naïf activists who seek to be confirmed in their certainty that the multitude is winning and the Empire will be defeated. Some of them have taken part in the workers' struggles of the last decades, some are protesting against the devastation of what is left of the natural landscape, some are active in the denunciation of the daily evictions – but at the same time they seem completely aware of the dissolution of the expectations of modernity.

Although my experience in Seoul left me with the perception of reaching the end of line of the contemporary hell, meeting the members of Sujonomo N made me understand that even in hell there are wonderful people and nice places where you can relax and have fun. In fact, we are not bound to bend to the surrounding violence and to conform to the surrounding sadness. Although they live under the constant threat of nuclear attack by a tyrant who lives just a few miles away in the city of Pyongyang, although they are threatened by the ultimate desertification wreaked by the tyrants of financial capitalism, my friends from Sujonomo N seem conscious of the fact that only our sense of friendship and the pursuit of a project of common research can give us autonomy, and can allow us to create the conditions for a renaissance to follow the apocalypse which we are currently undergoing.

1 Bertil Lintner, *Great Leader, Dear Leader*, p. 47.

2 *Korea's Unique Alphabet*, p. 62

Chapter 11

What Should We Do When Nothing Can Be Done?

‘Why did I write such a horrible book?’ I suddenly asked myself, once I had neared the end of this discourse. Why had I sifted through all these ugly materials, all this depressing stuff?

Crime, mass murders, suicide – these are not subjects for a good-natured guy.

I’m not a morbid person, I don’t like this kind of pornography. Nevertheless, at the end of summer 2012, I started writing this text almost in a state of rapture, half-consciously, dragged by a sort of excitement and curiosity, and primarily driven by the perception that here, in these dark subjects, there is something peculiar to the spirit of our time.

So, did I write this book out of an intention to denounce the nihilistic effects that omnipresent competition and aggressiveness are bringing about in the contemporary psychosphere? Well, yes and no. Denouncing the wrongdoings of Neoliberal theology and capitalist absolutism is not really my goal.

In fact, this kind of denunciation is scarcely useful.

The evil that financial capitalism is wreaking on the lives of working people is largely known, and delivering catastrophic warnings generally offers little help. People already know that their well-being will be threatened and their lifestyle will worsen as long as the engine of financial capitalism continues to run at full steam against the interests of society as a whole. What they do not know is how to stop this train of devastation, now that all the traditional forms of protest and democratic expression have been neutralized.

So denunciation is feeding frustration and leading nowhere.

In place of denunciation, what is needed is a line of flight.

Precarious Ethics

As I came to be persuaded that politics is unable effectively to oppose this financial aggression, I began to consider what *has* to be done when nothing *can* be done.

More precisely: what kind of ethical stance should we adopt now that the conditions of ethical behaviour seem to have been cancelled, and that the foundations of economic value, which used to be predictable, have become random and subject to arbitrary decision?

Ethics used to be based on the proximity of the other. Ethical behaviour necessarily implied a sense of solidarity, the perception of belonging to a community, a territory, a shared destiny, and aspired toward the communal search for a common future.

But what happens when competition becomes the general form of social relation, and the perception of the other becomes disembodied, functional and purely operational? What happens when every relation becomes fundamentally precarious?

Since precariousness suggests randomness, impermanence, instability, it may seem that human life on this planet has always been essentially precarious and that, in the course of human evolution, naked force has been the only way to decide and the only foundation of social order. Thus, it might seem that only religious beliefs could set a limit to the brutal law of the strongest, according to ethical behaviour which is based on the moral law proceeding from God.

Yet the project of modern ethics strove to find an alternative both to pure, naked force and to theology. Its foundations were established by the Protestant bourgeoisie when the economy replaced theology as the source of law. Private property, equal rights, waged labour – all basic principles of the bourgeois civilization – were principles in some way based on the common interest: expansion of the community, growth of production and increasing consumption. Ethical values and the common interest of the territorial community were linked. Hard work deserved to be rewarded not only for its supposed innate worth, but also because rewarding work was the only way to foster a sense of responsibility in the whole of society. Responsibility meant respect for the common interest.

Then, once financial capitalism had deterritorialized production and randomized the very source of power, the shared conditions of ethical behaviour vanished. The fluctuations of the financial market have little to do with the responsible behaviour of stakeholders; on the contrary, financial profits increasingly depend on the violation of the common interest, as with the recent American subprime crisis and with countless other cases of financial bankruptcy.

Modern progress was essentially aimed at reducing the dependence of human life on the unpredictability of Nature, and its social institutions were aimed at protecting citizens from the whimsicality of the market. Since the end of the nineteenth century the establishment of guarantees for workers and citizens has been one of the main concerns of progressive states.

Everybody knows that Nature is not benevolent, and that the jungle is not a

safe place, particularly for those creatures that are not, by nature, aggressive. Everybody knows that life is merciless, and that time is marked by the entropic law of dispersion, loss, malady and death. This is why human beings have created that thing that goes under the name of society, along with all those institutions that are supposed to protect us from the harshness of life. This is why human beings have developed scientific knowledge and technology. Only when people can expect a reasonable degree of protection against misery and against the violence of the economy can they enjoy their life.

Then came Margaret Thatcher, who declared that there is no such thing as society, only individuals fighting for their survival. Suddenly, Darwin's description of the functioning of Nature was turned into a political agenda. In the world described by Darwin, strong individuals survive and weak individuals succumb. This is the brutal law of natural evolution. It is also that from which the modern project of civilization had tried to protect humans.

Nature's brutality began to return in the last decades of the twentieth century, and it finally triumphed in the beginning of the new century. Nature, which had been exploited and subjugated by all-consuming industrial growth, is now returning in its most frightening form.

Precariousness is the desert of the world returned to jungle.

In the field of labour, precarity is the cancellation of the rules governing the relations between workers and capital, and particularly of the contractual guarantees of the continuity and regularity of jobs. Precarization is made possible by the spread of information technologies. When the production of goods is turned into information, and the network becomes the sphere of recombination of productive actions which take place in distant spaces and moments of time, the capitalist's need to buy the whole of the worker's lifetime ends – he just needs fragments of time. The networked machine ceaselessly picks up and recombines fragments of info-time from the ocean of social life and intelligence. Thus, precariousness invades every space of social life, and permeates the expectations and the emotions of individuals, whose time is fragmented, fractalized, cellularized.

This is the state we live in, at the beginning of the new century.

The ethical foundation of the modern social scene was based on the responsibility of the bourgeois class and the solidarity between workers. The Protestant bourgeois was responsible to God and to the territorial community which made his prosperity possible. The worker was united with his/her colleagues through the consciousness of sharing the same interests.

Both of these ethical foundations of modern ethics have dissolved. The post-bourgeois capitalist class does not feel responsible for the community and the territory because financial capitalism is totally deterritorialized and has no

interest in the future well-being of the community. On the other hand, the post-Fordist worker no longer shares the same interest as his/her colleagues, but, on the contrary, is forced to compete every day against other workers for a job and a salary in the deregulated labour arena. Within the framework of this new precarious organization of labour, building solidarity becomes a difficult task.

During the last three decades social movements have tried to re-establish the conditions of modern ethics and to reaffirm the values that were the foundations of the bourgeois civilization: democracy, job security and the respect of law.

Unsuccessfully.

While the Neoliberal wave, taking advantage of new technology-based lifestyles, was transforming cultural and political expectations, the Left has been defending the ethical rules of the past and the established political institutions. Driven to an inherently conservative position, the leftists lost their character and their identity.

Now, it is finally crystal clear: resistance is over. Capitalist absolutism will not be defeated and democracy will never be reinstated. That game is over.

What will be the game to come?

The Next Game

I think that the next game will be about neuro-plasticity. Mapping the activity of the brain is going to be the main task of science in the next decades, while wiring the activity of the collective brain will be the main task of technology. The new alternative will emerge at this level, between the ultimate automation of the collective brain and the conscious self-organization of the general intellect.

Cognitive workers – particularly scientists, artists and engineers – will be the prime actors in this new game. In the meantime, we have to draw the lines of a new ethics in order to be able to retain our humanity in the course of the trans-human transition.

This is the horizon of the next alternative: either a new form of ultimate neuro-totalitarianism, or a new form of trans-human Humanism. Will the general intellect be subjugated by the automatic machine, connecting individual operational brains deprived of any freedom and singularity? Or will the conscious conjunction of sensible and sensitive singularities be able to self-organize, and find pathways of sympathy, sharing and collaboration?

Will the general intellect be permanently codified by the matrix and turned into a networked swarm, or will the general intellect be able to re-conjoin with

its social body, and create the conditions for autonomy and independence from the matrix?

The main field of contention is going to be the activity of the mind. The organic hardware, the brain, and the cognitive software of mental activity are going to become the crucial staging post of intellectual research and political conflict.

In April 2013, President Obama announced the research project *Brain Activity Mapping* as the main scientific investment for the next decade in the US.

Currently, scientists can monitor the activity of a single neuron using electrodes. Functional magnetic resonance imaging and similar techniques allow them to watch the whole brain in action. But the middle ground eludes the researcher's curiosity: how do neurons work together in networks? What happens when the brain's circuitry breaks down?

After the screening and mapping of the human genome, which was the big scientific enterprise of the nineties, now the screening and mapping of the brain may be conceived as an entry point to analysis of the consciously designed neuroplastic adaptation (CDNpA).

CDNpA will be the field of conflict, imagination and experimentation in the next twenty years.

Who will be the primary actor in this process? The empathic net of autonomous organization of cognitive workers, or the matrix of bio-financial capitalism?

The alternative that may be envisioned for the future is therefore the following: submission of the mind to the rules of the global neuro-machine according to the competitive principle of the capitalist economy – or the disentanglement of the autonomous potency of the general intellect.

The process of transformation is shifting from the field of political decision-making to the conceptual and practical sphere of neuroplasticity.

The brain mutation that is underway can be described as a spasmodic attempt to cope with the surrounding chaotic infosphere and to reframe the relation between infosphere and the brain. Social brain is obliged to cope with traumatic phenomena. Not only the psychic dimension of the unconscious is disturbed, but the fabric of the neural system itself is subjected to trauma, overload, disconnection. The adaptation of the brain to the new environment involves enormous suffering, a tempest of violence and madness.

My question is: does consciousness play a role in this process of mutation? Does imagination consciously act on the neuro-plastic process? Can the conscious organism do something when it is taken in a situation of spasm?

Imagination is the faculty that makes it possible to go beyond the limits of language, the ability to recompose the imaginary fragments (and also

conceptual and linguistic fragments) that we collect from the experience of the past. Imagination draws fragments from the warehouse of our memory – which actually is not a warehouse, but a dynamic machine for re-elaboration. Then imagination redraws the borders and redesigns the forms, and this process of redesigning enables us to see a new horizon, and to project a world as-yet-unseen.

So, at the end of the day, why did I write such a horrible book? I did it because I am looking for an ethical method of withdrawal from the present barbarianism, and at the same time I want to find a way of interpreting the new ethical values that barbarianism is bringing about.

How can we remain human, how can we speak of solidarity, while abandoning the emptied and ineffective field of political action?

Dark Zeitgeist

In the contemporary aesthetic production it's easy to detect the signs of a sort of dark zeitgeist.

Zeitgeist – the spirit of the time – means perception of imminence.

If we look at recent narrative works we find everywhere the same no-way-out imagination. Art, poetry, narration, music, cinema and the overall aesthetic semiosis of our time are tracing a landscape of imminent darkness: social de-evolution, physical decay and neuro-totalitarianism.

The Hunger Games, directed by Gary Ross, has been a massive box office success, the first film since *Avatar* to top the North American box office for four consecutive weekends. Millions of young people worldwide have seen this movie; millions have read the books written by Suzanne Collins.

I went to see the movie, part one and part two. Then I read the third book of the sequel, *Mockingjay*.

Did I like *Hunger Games*? Well, I don't know. Certainly, it affected me deeply. I probably don't need to recap the plot, as it is widely known. Just a few words: the new civilization of Panem is based on massive slavery, military violence, and privilege of a small minority of people, who live in the capital city. Every year the military captures two young persons from every district of the country, and the tributes (so they are named) are carried to the capital and forced to fight in the widely televised Hunger Games. Only one out of twenty-four is allowed to survive: the winner.

The popularity of the series can be attributed to the effectiveness of this metaphor for the world we are going to inhabit in the predictable future – one in

which competition, ferocity and loneliness are the only rules.

The novel deals with the struggle for self-preservation that the people of Panem face in their districts. The yearly games are the climax and the overarching metaphor of this post-civilized country.

What is the message that the author wants to convey? What is the message received by the audience? Donald Sutherland, who magnificently acts as the president of this ultra-totalitarian system, said in an interview that the movie has to be seen as a denunciation of contemporary social inequality. But in my opinion the movie has no political intention, and it does not suggest any moral approach. Author Suzanne Collins and director Gary Ross know that their audience is not going to see that movie with socially oriented expectations. Class hatred is not the issue. Helplessness is the issue. Hopelessness is the issue.

I roamed around in the *Hunger Games* blogosphere and talked with students about the film, and I drew the conclusion that the movie captures the mood of the wide majority of the precarious generation, which is one of an unquestioning acceptance of reality through a deep cynicism regarding the possibility of an alternative. As the only imagination of the future is dystopian, dystopia is the world that we will soon be living in. The only conclusion is: let's try to be the winner of the Hunger Games; let's be prepared to succumb.

A Touch of Sin, a 2013 movie directed by Jia Zhangke, can be seen as an overview of the precarious life of Chinese workers. Produced by Takeshi Kitano, the movie is composed of four stories: four people who live in the Chinese countryside, or in small cities in which the effects of capitalist modernization have shaken lifestyles and expectations while failing to provide the prosperity of the faraway metropolis. These four people have been pulled out of traditional, oppressive collectivism only to be thrown into a condition of humiliation, stress, violence and above all loneliness. For them the relation with the territory is broken, the relation with the community is circumscribed. Everybody is searching his or her lonely path towards job, salary, sex, only occasionally meeting the path of somebody else. All is frail, hasty, disturbed.

Out of reach lie solidarity, recognition, not to mention friendship.

Each part of the movie ends with an act of violence. Lopsided, meaningless violence.

Unhappiness seems to be the new normal in human life: a post-historical and post-political unhappiness similar to that depicted in *Still Life*, Jia Zhangke's beautiful previous movie.

Still Life recounted the story of a worker who returns home after years away and finds that his house, his wife and his daughter are no longer there, since their village has been submerged by the water of the Yangtze River for the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. A new Nature has taken the place of the

old one, literally submerging life, villages, personal effects, memories, in order to open the way to the triumph of economic innovation.

Mediocre though it is, *The Circle*, a novel written by Dave Eggers (2013), is also an interesting reflection on the relation between technology, communication, emotionality and power. The Circle is the name of a corporation, the most powerful corporation of the world: a sort of conglomerate of Google plus Facebook plus PayPal plus YouTube and much more. Three men lead the company: Stockton is a financial shark, Bayley is an enlightened utopian who wants to establish perfection on Earth by obliging everybody to be perfectly transparent towards everybody else, and Ty Gospodinov is the original conceiver of the Enterprise, the hidden mastermind of the project.

The main character of the book is Mae, a young woman who is hired by the company during Completion, the final phase of implementation of True You, a programme intended to enforce the recording of every instant of life for pervasive, ceaseless sharing, for a state of absolute openness and transparency.

Thanks to her absolute dedication to the mission of total transparency, Mae becomes the spokesperson of the corporation, the face that appears every day in the infinite channels of the all-pervasive television of The Circle, the ambassadors of the new Credo.

The Circle is all about the utter capture of human attention: ceaseless communication, mandatory friendliness, the creation of a new system of needs centred around the obsessive need incessantly to express and to share.

One may object that Eggers is simply re-enacting Orwell, over sixty years after the publication of *1984*. Although this objection is broadly valid, in the final pages of the novel Eggers goes further than Orwell, as the words of Ty Gospodinov expose the trans-human potency of the totalitarian nightmare of the completion. In the last scene of the novel the inventor and the founder of The Circle manages to covertly meet Mae, the newbie who is seducing the global audience. He has lost control of his own creature, and is deprived of any power on the unstoppable self-deployment of the project that he originally conceived.

> I did not intend any of this to happen. And it's moving so too fast. But I didn't picture a world where Circle membership was mandatory, where all government and all life was channelled through one network … There used to be the option of opting out. But now that's over. Completion is the end. We are closing the circle around everyone. It's a totalitarian nightmare …[1]

Automation cannot be stopped, as the creator of the automaton himself is overpowered by his own creature: the circle of continuous attention, the capture of attention.

The circle of perfect transparency of everybody to everybody.
The circle of total power and of total impotence.

Don't Take Shelter

Curtis's nightmares are frightening. He dreams of a yellow brownish rain and of a tempest destroying everything, particularly destroying his family, his wife and daughter, and the house where they live, one of those depressing but comfortable houses scattered in the flat landscape of the American Midwest. Are nightmares life, or is life a nightmare? Curtis's life is happy, he loves his wife Samantha and he loves his daughter Hannah, who suffers from deafness. The company he is working for gives Curtis a good insurance plan that will make it possible for his daughter to have surgery to resolve her hearing problems. Samantha is a stay-at-home mom who tries to supplement the family income. Money is tight, but, thanks to his job, Curtis manages to pay for the mortgage of the house.

Yet during the night Curtis's sleep is troubled by the nightmarish premonition of catastrophe. He decides to build a storm shelter in his backyard. To build the shelter he needs money, his salary is not enough for the task, and he goes to the bank to ask for a loan. 'Beware my boy', says the good bank director, 'these are difficult times. You have a family – running into debt is dangerous'. But Curtis insists that he needs money in order to build a shelter and to protect his family from the imaginary tempest.

Significantly, Jeff Nichols conceived the plot of the movie described here, *Take Shelter*, at the end of 2008, after the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, during the time in which, in the collective imagination, finance came to be increasingly linked to catastrophic events.

Samantha, Curtis's wife, is worried. Her husband's behaviour is strange. She is alarmed by the loan, and she understands that Curtis has mental health problems. She knows that his mother has been suffering from paranoid schizophrenia.

Then things take a turn for the worse. In order to excavate the backyard and make room for the shelter, Curtis takes a digger from the site where he works. Somehow the boss comes to know about this, and Curtis is fired. He is now jobless, anguished, on the brink of a nervous breakdown. The shelter is ready, and one night a tornado warning sends him and his family into the shelter. They sleep in the shelter, but the tempest is not the final catastrophe, and the following morning the sky is bright, and the neighbours are cleaning up some debris.

Samantha persuades Curtis to see a therapist.

The doctor suggests that they take a beach holiday before Curtis begins serious therapy, to return more relaxed and ready to start a new life. They go to the beach for a few days of vacation and relax.

Curtis is on the beach with his daughter building a sandcastle, when the little deaf-mute girl looks at the horizon and makes the sign of a storm. Curtis turns his head and looks at the sky: impressive clouds are announcing the most frightening of all storms. Samantha comes out of the house running, and the thick brownish rain of Curtis's nightmares begins to fall. She looks at the ocean, where the tide is pulling back, and a tsunami is growing in the distance.

Take Shelter recalls Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*, not only in the sequences involving birds attacking humans but also in the inexplicable premonition of an indefinable threat. The premonition is the same as that of the present global unconscious, as the inner landscape of mankind is assaulted by financial predation and by the coming environmental catastrophe.

Should we take shelter? Should we go to the bank and ask for a loan, and invest our future in protecting our future? Should we take our premonitions seriously? Should we accept that paranoia is a reasonable response to a danger that we cannot dispel, or should we dispel this as a paranoid delusion?

Nichols answers our questions: by investing our energy in building a shelter, we fall into the trap, to accept the dilemma of depression and catastrophe. When the tempest comes, we won't be home anyway, we'll be too far away from the shelter.

The European hope is turning into a nightmare, as Northern Protestants remain reluctant to pay the bill for the perceived laxity of Southern Catholics and the Orthodox. Goldman Sachs has sown the wind, and now the harvest of tempest is ripe.

The hope of the Arab Spring is turning into a nightmare too: Syrian civil war is spreading beyond the Syrian borders. The Islamic State is declared. The implausible idea of the Caliphate is becoming real and taking hold of a territory. And the Egyptian revolution has been trashed by the democratically elected Islamist government, subsequently overthrown by Sisi, Mubarak's avatar.

Israel is threatening Iran and Iran is threatening Israel, while Hezbollah announces the creation of a special force destined to occupy Northern Israel.

Money is our shelter, the only way we have to access life. But at the same time, if you want money you have to renounce life.

Don't build a shelter, it is surely going to be useless. Furthermore, building shelters is the job of those who are preparing the storm. Remain calm. Don't be attached to life, and most of all: don't have hope, that addictive poisonous weed.

Spasm

This horrible book is about subjectivation, the conscious, sensible aspect of evolution in the century that has just begun. Human evolution is made of hard stuff like technology, production, and the physical environment, but also the soft mental stuff, sensibility and language. Unconscious, desire, common expectations and fears, are the subjective side of human evolution. As it is the product of the never-ending transformation of the psycho-cultural composition of the social brain, this software is perpetually changing.

Pollution, sickness and physical suffering are obviously influencing the composition of the collective soul. Social consciousness is only the emerging face of the molecular becoming of the social unconscious: a liquid mixture where different substances ceaselessly interweave.

During the past century the hard stuff of social production has changed dramatically: the physical landscape of the world has been transformed by industry and war, urban spaces have been built and destroyed and rebuilt. Subjectivity, however, kept its fundamental orientation towards a progressive imagination of the future. Notwithstanding the hardship of widespread violence and exploitation, in modern times the expectations concerning the future were marked by a steady faith in evolution and growth. Even in the darkest moments of the history of the last century, even in the years of the Second World War, when people died fighting under the flags of Fascism, Communism and democracy, the imagination of the future was the imagination of a better world.

In the last two decades of the last century, the whole conceptual framework of evolution began to change. The idea of evolution has progressively ceased to coincide with economic expansion, and we are now faced with the challenge of learning to rethink evolution beyond the expectation of growth, beyond the conceptual framework of capitalism and accumulation. But this rethinking seems to us impossible, presently out of reach. Political will is paralysed, unable to dare and to imagine a radical transformation of the expectations and the form of life.

While info-technologies are provoking an acceleration of the rhythm of information and experience, simultaneously the space for physical movement is shrinking and the resources for economic expansion are becoming exhausted.

I call this double process of acceleration and exhaustion: the spasm.

A spasm is a sudden, abnormal, involuntary muscular contraction, or a series of alternating muscular contractions and relaxations. A spasm is also a sudden, brief spell of energy and an abnormal, painful intensification of the bodily nervous vibration.

In his book *Spasm* (1993), Arthur Kroker speaks of cyberpunk aesthetics and of partitioned recombinant bodies, in order to describe the effects of info-technology on the body-machine. According to Kroker, the introduction of electronic devices in the flesh of the organic body (prostheses, pharmacology) and in the space between organic bodies (digital enhancement of the bodily interaction, advertising, virtual sex) is the cause of an acceleration of the nervous vibration up to the point of spasm.

In Guattari's parlance a refrain (*retournelle*) is the link between the subject of enunciation and the cosmos, between a body and the surrounding environment, between the consciousness of a social group and its physical and imaginary territory. Deterritorialization breaks the chains, and jeopardizes the relation between subjectivity and its environment. As a reaction, the refrain tends to harden, to become stiff in order to dam the process of deterritorialization. In the case of neurotic identity the refrain is embodied in hardened representations, as an obsessional ritual or an aggressive reaction to change.

In the current anthropological mutation induced by digital info-technology and market globalization, the social organism is subjected to an accelerated deterritorialization that takes the form of a spasm.

In his last book, *Chaosmosis* (1992), Guattari writes that 'Among the fogs and miasmas which obscure our *fin de millenaire*, the question of subjectivity is now returning as a *leit motiv* …' He first adds: 'All the disciplines will have to combine their creativity to ward off the ordeals of barbarism, the mental implosion and chaosmic spasms looming on the horizon.' Then he writes: 'We have to conjure barbarianism, mental implosion, chaosmic spasm'.[2]

This last expression marks the consciousness of the darkness, and of the pathology that capitalism is bringing about. In that book Guattari foretold that the millennial transition was going to be an age of fog and miasmas, of obscurity and suffering. Now we know that he was perfectly right. Twenty years after *Chaosmosis*, we know that the fog is thicker than ever and that the miasmas are not vanishing, but becoming more dangerous, more poisonous than they have ever been.

Chaosmosis was published just a few months before the death of its author in 1992, when the world powers met in Rio de Janeiro to discuss and possibly to decide about the pollution and global warming that in those years was becoming increasingly apparent as a threat to human life on the planet. The American President George Bush Senior declared that the American way of life was not negotiable, meaning that the US did not intend to reduce carbon emissions, energy consumption and economic growth for the sake of the environmental future of the planet. Then, as on many other occasions afterwards, the United States government refused to negotiate and to accept any global agreement on

this subject.

Today, twenty years later, the devastation of the environment, natural life and social life have reached a level that seems to be irreversible. Irreversibility is a difficult concept to convey, being totally incompatible with modern politics. When we use this word we are declaring *ipso facto* the death of politics itself.

The process of subjectivation develops within this framework, which reshapes the composition of unconscious flows in the social culture. 'Subjectivity is not a natural given any more than air or water. How do we produce it, capture it, enrich it and permanently reinvent it in order to make it compatible with universes of mutating values?'[3]

The problem is not to protect subjectivity. The problem is to create and to spread flows of re-syntonization of subjectivity in a context of mutation. How can the subjectivity flows that we produce be independent from the corrupting effects of the context, while still interacting with the context?

How to create autonomous subjectivity (autonomous from the surrounding corruption, violence, anxiety)? Is this at all possible in the age of the spasm?

A spasm is a painful vibration which forces the organism to an extreme mobilization of nervous energies. This acceleration and this painful vibration are the effects of the compulsive acceleration of the rhythm of social interaction and of the exploitation of the social nervous energies. As the process of valorization of semiocapital demands more and more nervous productivity, the nervous system of the organism is subjected to increasing exploitation. Here comes the spasm: it is the effect of a violent penetration of the capitalist exploitation into the field of info-technologies, involving the sphere of cognition, of sensibility, and the unconscious.

Sensibility is invested by the info-acceleration, and the vibration induced by the acceleration of nervous exploitation is the spasmic effect.

What should we do when we are in a situation of spasm?

Guattari is not using the word 'spasm' in isolation. He says precisely: 'chaosmic spasm'.

If the spasm is the panic response of the accelerated vibration of the organism, and the hyper-mobilization of desire submitted to the force of the economy, chaosmosis is the creation of a new (more complex) order (syntony, and sympathy) emerging from the present chaos. Chaosmosis is the osmotic passage from a state of chaos to a new order, where the word 'order' does not have a normative or ontological meaning. Order is to be intended as harmony between mind and the semio-environment, as the sharing of a sympathetic mindset. Sympathy, common perception. Chaos is an excess of speed of the infosphere in relation to the ability of elaboration of the brain.

In their last book, *What Is Philosophy?*, which is about philosophy but also

about growing old, Deleuze and Guattari speak of the relation between chaos and the brain. 'From Chaos to the Brain' is the title of the last chapter of the book:

> We require just a little order to protect us from chaos. Nothing is more distressing than a thought that escapes itself, than ideas that fly off, that disappear hardly formed, already eroded by forgetfulness or precipitated into others that we no longer master. These are infinite variabilities the appearing and disappearing of which coincide. They are infinite speeds that blend into the immobility of the colorless and silent nothingness they traverse, without nature or thought. This is the instant of which we do not know whether it is too long or too short for time. We receive sudden jolts that beat like arteries. We constantly lose our ideas.[4]

As consciousness is too slow for processing the information that comes from the world in acceleration (info-technology multiplied by semiocapitalist exploitation), we are unable to translate the world into a cosmos, mental order, syntony and sympathy.

A transformation is needed: a jump to a new refrain, to a new rhythm; chaosmosis is the shift from a rhythm of conscious elaboration (refrain) to a new rhythm, which is able to process what the previous rhythm could not process.

A shift in the speed of consciousness, the creation of a different order of mental processing: this is chaosmosis.

In order to shift from a rhythm to a different rhythm, from a refrain to another refrain, Guattari says we need a 'chaoide', a living decoder of chaos.

Chaoide, in Guattari's parlance, is a sort of de-multiplier, an agent of re-syntonization, a linguistic agent able to disengage from the spasmic refrain. The chaoide is full of chaos, receives and decodes the bad vibrations of the planetary spasm, but does not absorb the negative psychological effects of chaos, of the surrounding aggressiveness, of fear.

The chaoide is an ironic elaborator of chaos. 'The ecosophical cartography', writes Guattari, 'will not have the finality of communicating, but of producing enunciation concatenations able to capture the points of singularity of a situation'.[5] Where are today's concatenations that offer conscious organisms the possibility of emerging from the present spasmogenic framework, the framework of financial capitalism?

The rhythm that financial capitalism is imposing on social life is a spasmogenic rhythm, a spasm that is not only exploiting the work of men and women, not only subjugating cognitive labour to the abstract acceleration of the info-machine, but is also destroying the singularity of language, preventing its

creativity and sensibility. The financial dictatorship is essentially the domination of abstraction on language, command of the mathematical ferocity on living and conscious organisms.

This is why we need to produce and to circulate chaoides, that is, tools for the conceptual elaboration both of the surrounding and of the internalized chaos.

A chaoide is a form of enunciation (artistic, poetic, political, scientific) which is able to open the linguistic flows to different rhythms and to different frames of interpretation.

Chaosmosis means reactivation of the body of social solidarity, reactivation of imagination, a new dimension for human evolution, beyond the limited horizon of economic growth.

Writing this book, I intended to produce a chaoide. Dealing with crime and suicide, I have been dealing with the contemporary spasm, and I have tried to decipher the social and cultural genesis of the present pathology. At the same time, I have tried to breathe normally, while staring into the eyes of the beast.

Dyst-irony

It's not easy to harmonize your breathing to the cosmic breath, when people are suffering around you and you feel guilty in one sense or another for their pain – because you know that your job is to find a solution, a therapy, a way out – and you are unable to say what should be done.

Jackie Orr writes in *Panic Diaries*:

> In an exquisite sense of contagious connectivity, paranoia is one form that a felt insistence on the social and historical structuring of psychic experience can take. Paranoia 'knows well' the resonant evidence suggesting that everything really is connected, the psyche and the power of the social, a small white pill and a wildly historical story.[6]

Paranoia 'knows well', but we need to free ourselves from the effects of that knowledge in order to disentangle from it the possibility of invention, of richness, of happiness and the good life.

In the last few decades, artistic sensibility has been paralysed by a sense of paranoiac enchantment: psychic frailty, fear of precariousness and the premonition of a catastrophe that is impossible to avoid. This is why art has become so concerned with suicide and crime. This is why, very often, crime and suicide (most of all suicidal crime) have been modelled as art.

Now all this paranoia has to be disposed of. All that I have been writing of in

this horrible book is already out of fashion.

Let's forget about it; let's go forward.

Dystopia has to be faced and dissolved by irony.

If paranoia 'knows well', we need a method of ignorance. We need to assume some distance from what seems to be inscribed as an imminent-immanent tendency in the present cartography of events. The spectrum of the possible is much larger than the range of probability. We need to correct dystopia with irony, because irony (far from being cynical alliance with power) is the excess of language that opens the door to the infinity of the possible.

I strongly dislike doomsayers, those gloomy prophets who want to spread the message that humanity is close to extinction and that we must all repent for our misdeeds. I have little more time for those hysterical enemies of political corruption who see conspiracies and hidden projects of evil everywhere, and absolutely want to revolutionize the world.

Frankly, I don't think that political awareness is going to prove the best medicine for our current malady. Most people know that financial dictatorship is destroying their life; the problem is knowing what to do about it. It is possible that nothing can be done, that power has become so deeply entrenched in the automatisms regulating daily life, connecting our interchanges, and infiltrating our words, that bio-financial control cannot be undone, or avoided.

So what can be done when nothing can be done?

I think that ironic autonomy is the answer. I mean the contrary of participation, I mean the contrary of responsibility, I mean the contrary of faith. Politicians call on us to take part in their political concerns, economists call on us to be responsible, to work more, to go shopping, to stimulate the market. Priests call on us to have faith. If you follow these inveiglements to participate, to be responsible – you are trapped. Do not take part in the game, do not expect any solution from politics, do not be attached to things, do not hope.

Dystopian irony (dyst-irony) is the language of autonomy.

Be sceptical: do not believe your own assumptions and predictions (or mine).

And do not revoke revolution. Revolt against power is necessary even if we may not know how to win.

Do not belong. Distinguish your destiny from the destiny of those who want to belong and to participate and to pay their debt. If they want war, be a deserter. If they are enslaved but want you to suffer like them, do not give in to their blackmail.

If you have to choose between death and slavery, don't be a slave. You have some chance to survive. If you accept slavery, you will die sooner or later anyway. As a slave.

You will die anyway; it is not particularly important when. What is important

is how you live your life.

Remember that despair and joy are not incompatible. Despair is a consequence of understanding. Joy is a condition of the emotional mind. Despair is to acknowledge the truth of the present situation, but the sceptical mind knows that the only truth is shared imagination and shared projection. So do not be frightened by despair. It does not delimit the potential for joy. And joy is a condition for proving intellectual despair wrong.

Finally, don't take me too seriously. Don't take too seriously my catastrophic premonitions. And in case it is difficult to follow these prescriptions, don't take too seriously my prescriptions.

Irony is about the independence of mind from knowledge; it is about the excessive nature of the imagination.

So, at the very end: don't believe (me).

1 Dave Eggers, *The Circle*, p. 233.

2 Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis*, p. 135.

3 Ibid.

4 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, p. 201.

5 Ibid., p. 99.

6 Jackie Orr, *Panic Diaries*, p. 17.

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